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Bi-national Weddings in Spain: A Recent and Increasingly Frequent Phenomenon in the Context of the Globalization of the Marriage Market

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Abstract

Our proposal gathers data from an ongoing project about the formation of binational heterosexual couples in Spain. Our focus is the new territory built by binational couples to address and understand part of the transformation of the concepts of femininity and masculinity and gender relations. Our contribution proposes the hypothesis that the emergence of these unions in Spain is mainly related to the changes experienced in the last decades by most Spanish women and the reaction provoked by these changes in the masculine Spanish population that has embarked upon the search of a more traditional woman. Specific characteristics of these couples are described, paying attention to variables such as the age of women, the percentage of these that are housewives, urban or rural origins of men, educational level of both spouses and occupational class of the wife.

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1. Introduction

In 1996 there were 8,000 mixed or bi-national marriages in Spain, by which we mean heterosexual unions between a Spanish spouse and a foreigner. A little more than a decade later, in 2009, the last year of continuing growth in this type of union, this figure had risen to almost 30,000. Over the course of the 15-year period for which we have statistical data on this phenomenon (1996-2010) there were a total of 271,117 bi-national weddings in Spain, of which close to 60% were marriages between a Spanish man and foreign woman and a little over 40% were marriages between Spanish women and foreign men. Of the total number of weddings in Spain during this period, mixed weddings rose from 4% of the total at the beginning of the period to 17% at the end. This progression, and the distribution of the figures, is very much in line with what was happening on an international scale during the same years. The global search for a spouse, in this regard, traces routes linking men from the rich countries of Western Europe, North America and Asia/Pacific with women from parts of the Caribbean, Latin America, Eastern Europe and South-East Asia (Cohen, 1986; Cooke, 1986; Cahill, 1990; Chin,

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1994; Halualani, 1995; Robinson, 1996; de Melo, 2000; Riaño, 2003; Suzuki, 2003; Mainardi, 2006; Bermúdez, 2007).

As far as we see it, both the context of this recent phenomenon and the increase in mixed marriages make it necessary to consider a set of tangible and ideological factors which have both a global dimension and local characteristics. Hence, the supranational context is characterized by the growing existence of transnational flows and realities of a global character, by the emergence and expansion of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), and by the move from a society based on production to one focused on consumption and choice.

The specific Spanish context of this global phenomenon has a series of individual characteristics which need to be highlighted. On the one hand, Spain is the country in the European Union with the greatest sustained increase in immigration from 1997 through to the final years of the first decade of this century. In addition, this phenomenon meant that Spain had changed from being a country that produced emigrants to one that received immigrants.

On the other hand, Spain stands out as one of the countries which has witnessed a significant transformation in its gender system in recent decades, with considerable sociological changes (women entering higher levels of education and the labour market, readily available means of birth control and emancipation from reproduction) and gender policies, especially and essentially legislative policies, frequently of a pioneering nature, and widely publicized both in and outside Spain (gay marriage, the recent abortion and divorce laws which have increased rights and made processes easier).

As a result of the context we have just outlined, one could safely attribute the increase in the number of these unions in Spain to the increase in the immigrant population and the facilities provided by increasingly widespread information and communication technologies. However, our hypothesis holds that, in addition to these, there are other reasons that can account for this phenomenon, and to this end we place particular emphasis on the gender variable dimension we have referred to, in line with other works which describe, for example, the diverse gender patterns linked to marital mobility in a global context, showing women and men who take the initiative, who make choices and who become active agents, and which point to motivations and reasons for this option, whilst also discussing the impact of these unions on the concept of love (Barbara, 1985; Delcroix & Guyaux, 1992; Ordóñez, 1997; Constable, 1998, 2003; Scholes, 1999; Simons, 1999; Gamburd, 2000; Clark, 2001; Parreñas, 2005; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007; Roca, 2009). More specifically, we assert that the emergence of these types of couples is more the fruit of a deliberate search than a fortuitous encounter. The increased material and emotional independence acquired by Spanish women as a consequence of the changes mentioned above is meeting resistance from some men, who disagree with this new and increasingly widespread female model and have set out to seek a partner in a different marriage market to that of their own country, in the context of what in recent years has come to be known as “the crisis of masculinity”.

In order to test our hypothesis, we will first of all consider the characteristics of these unions by looking at the existing nationality combinations, and secondly we will try to identify whether there is only one specific profile of Spanish man who enters into a relationship with a foreign woman or whether there are various profiles

2. Love’s geography of the Spanish man

If the emergence and the increase of mixed marriages in Spain were only a consequence of the migratory process experienced by the country in the last two decades we would expect mixed unions between a Spanish man and a foreign spouse to occur in approximately the same proportion as the weight of the whole immigrant population as well as the relative weight of each of the nationalities which make it up. We would expect the increase in the Spanish marriage market due to the influx of immigrants to be distributed proportionately, in other words, the number of mixed couples should proportionately reflect the numbers and presence of the different foreign immigrant groups.

If we look at the following table, which shows the number of marriages between a Spanish male spouse and a foreign female spouse, we can see that this hypothesis is not borne out. Moreover, it also puts these figures into context, by including the total number of foreign women residents in Spain from each of the nationalities which stand out in terms of the number of unions with Spanish men. As one can see, some nationalities that constitute a

relatively small group in terms of numbers stand out in terms of the disproportionate number of unions with Spanish men.

Table 1: Marriage between a Spanish and foreign spouse and foreign population in Spain, 2008. Foreign women over 15

<i>Country</i>	<i>Marriages with spanish men, 2008</i>	<i>Total of foreign women residents in Spain, 2008</i>
TOTAL	16811	2105823
Europa	3888	957110
[Community and non-Community]		
France	229	49683
Germany	223	83187
United Kingdom	177	156063
Italy	162	56097
Poland	162	31325
Romania	----	289092
Portugal	141	39780
Russia	909	26964
Ukraine	296	35987
America	11025	841254
Brazil	2446	62460
Colombia	1544	137934
Ecuador	889	179067
Argentina	809	62359
Bolivia	659	117334
Dominican Republic	871	39224
Venezuela	734	29894
Paraguay	669	40937
Cuba	483	26230
Africa	1380	226957
Morocco	1012	173945
Nigeria	193	11815
Asia	340	79443
China	87	45636
Philippines	29	12432
Pakistan	---	3988
India	---	5615

We have further refined the analysis of the evidence displayed in the table above, by applying a formula to the data in order to obtain a relative concentration index (RCI) with the aim of evaluating the weight of a specific group of foreign women within mixed marriages, whilst also taking into account this group's weight within the Spanish population at large. The calculation was made in the following manner:

$$\text{RCI (country X)} = \frac{\% \text{ of women from country X between 15 and 84 years married to Spaniards}}{\% \text{ of women from country X between 15 and 84 years residents in Spain}}$$

The following table shows the result after applying the formula to the countries with the largest number of mixed marriages. We organized the table ranging from the most RCIs (countries over-represented, with a greater weight in numbers of mixed marriages than their weight in the Spanish population) to the least RCI (countries under-represented, with a lower weight in numbers of mixed marriages than their weight in the Spanish population).

Table 2: Women's nationalities according to Relative Concentration Index RCI, 2008

Countries with overrepresentation feminine		Countries with under-representation feminine			
Brazil	4.75	Uruguay	0.98	Germany	0.37
Russia	4.10	Peru	0.98	Netherlands	0.35
Mexico	4.00	Equatorial Guinea	0.89	Algeria	0.27
Venezuela	3.02	Philippines	0.81	China	0.24
Dominican Republic	2.80	Italy	0.81	Bulgaria	0.19
United States of America	2.35	Czech Republic	0.77	United Kingdom	0.15
Cuba	2.23	Morocco	0.74		
Paraguay	2.05	Bolivia	0.70		
Nigeria	2.04	France	0.70		
Honduras	1.92	Poland	0.65		
Chile	1.62	Ireland	0.64		
Japan	1.41	Ecuador	0.62		
Colombia	1.39	Lithuania	0.62		
Argentina	1.24	Portugal	0.50		
Ukraine	1.05	Belgium	0.43		

Source: own elaboration from INE data (www.ine.es consulted on 21-12-2009)

Our findings show that Brazilian and Russian women proportionately get married to Spanish men the most. More specifically, they do so four times more than would be expected considering the volume of the female population from their country in Spain. In general one can assert that Spanish men get married principally to women from South America and avoid getting married to women of European origin – with the exception of Russia. One possible explanation for this trend shown by the data could be the similarity of the language and culture. But the fact that the South American country with the highest number of women who get married to Spanish men is Brazil and that the country with the second highest number is Russia, whilst not refuting this argument completely, does nevertheless require one to qualify it.[†] The analysis of the profiles of Spanish men who enter into a mixed marriage will help us to explain this geography of love and at the same time to verify whether our initial hypothesis is borne out.

3. In search of the lost woman: Profiles of Spanish men in mixed marriages

Our hypothesis asserts that a number of those Spanish men who choose to enter a partnership with a non-Spanish woman do so in order to find a wife who reproduces a similar role to that played by the majority of Spanish women until recently. Hence, in the collective imagination of this group the women from the nationalities most present in mixed marriages would be receptive to establishing gender relationships within the relationship which are centered on the idea of the male breadwinner and the housewife. They seek a type of woman, supposedly difficult to find amongst Spanish women, who is dedicated to the home, her children and her husband, who is docile, submissive and affectionate, and who represents a stereotypical ideal of femininity[‡].

[†] We have analyzed Spanish men's geography of desire, its causes and meaning elsewhere (Roca, 2009). Here let us just say that, in general, these geographies are closely linked to the political economy and cultural logic of desire, which in this case is based on the colonial past, the language and a common cultural substratum, amongst other reasons.

[‡] We have carried out an extensive analysis on the motives, reasons and expectations in mixed unions in Roca (2011).

The qualitative fieldwork has enabled us to draw up this hypothesis[§]. We now wish, based on the statistical data on mixed marriages in Spain in the year 2008, to test this hypothesis further and establish the characteristics and dimensions of the group which constitutes the focus of our study.

Given the fact that this group is characterized as one which reacts against and is opposed to a type of woman who has transformed her traditional role as housewife into another focused on more egalitarian gender relationships, we have established an initial distribution of four broad groups of men belonging to the population of Spanish males married to foreign women. These groups are made up of Spanish men, who, when they married a foreign wife, were 1) single, under 40 years old; 2) single, over 40 years old, 3) widowers; or 4) divorced. The sample of the mixed marriages that were held in 2008, distributed over these variables, gives the following percentages displayed in the table 3.

Our position is that if our hypothesis is true then the group of men reacting against the transformation of the gender role in Spanish women and therefore seeking a more traditional type of woman in a mixed union will be made up of men in groups 2, 3 and 4, and these account for almost half of all men in mixed marriages in the year we have taken as our reference point. These would be men who have either had difficulties in finding a partner amongst Spanish women (group 2) or those who after a marriage with a Spanish woman seek a relationship with a non-Spanish woman. The common denominator of these three groups would be the presence of an unsatisfactory relationship with Spanish women (group 4) or of a satisfactory relationship which they wish to repeat (group 3), or in the corresponding search for a satisfactory relationship which they think is more easy to achieve with a foreign woman (group 1). In most cases, moreover, the group is characterized by belonging to a generation socialized in markedly traditional gender relationships. To give us a better idea of the plausibility of the hypothesis, the following table shows that the combination of a divorced Spanish man with a foreign woman is the one with a highly significant percentage compared with the other possible combinations of mixed couples in Spain.

If we look in the Table 4 at the percentage of housewives amongst the wives of each of the four groups observed we will notice that, indeed, the percentage of housewives is appreciably higher in the three groups we identified as more likely to search for a wife of a traditional nature than in the group of single men under 40 years old.

Similarly it should be pointed out that, amongst other significant variables we might provide, the three groups which make up the profile of the Spanish men who seek a foreign wife motivated by finding a woman of a traditional nature (groups 2, 3, and 4) show very different percentages to those of the group of single men under 40 (group 1) as far as the level of education of the women they marry is concerned. As the table 5 shows, single men under 40 get married to women of a higher educational level: more than 50% of the women have completed the second stage of secondary education or higher education whilst in the group of single men over 40, widowers and divorced men, over 50% of the wives have only finished primary school education or the first stage of secondary school.

[§] Both the qualitative fieldwork and the statistical work have been carried out in the context of various financed research projects: “Amor importado, migrantes por amor: la constitución de parejas entre españoles y mujeres de América latina y de Europa del Este en el marco de la transformación actual del sistema de género en España” [Imported Love, migrants for love: the constitution of couples formed by Spanish men and women from Latin America and Eastern Europe in the context of the current transformation in the gender system in Spain], Scientific Research and Technological Development Projects; Program: Strategic Action on the promotion of equal opportunities between men and women; National Research, Development and Innovation Plan (2004-2007), Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Institute of women (Exp. N° 47/05, AMIM, 2006-2008); and “Amores transnacionales: constitución y desarrollo de parejas mixtas en España” [Transnational loves, constitution and development of mixed couples in Spain], National Research, Development and Innovation plan (2008-2011), Ministry of Science and Innovation (CSO 2009-10187).

Table 3: Types of couples according to their civil status

Marriage Type	Women's Civil Status	Men's Civil Status								
	Single	Widow	Divorced	Total	Single	Widower	Divorced	Total		
Spanish Man and Foreign Woman	Recount		13203	241	3368	16812	11556	409	4846	16811
	% within Marriage Type		78.5%	1.4%	20.0%	100%	68.7%	2.4%	28.8%	100%
Foreign Man and Spanish Woman	Recount		9261	85	1896	11242	9885	48	1310	11243
	% within Marriage Type		82.4%	.8%	16.9%	100%	87.9%	0.4%	11.7%	100%
Foreign Man and Foreign Woman	Recount		7122	91	1053	8266	7101	100	1065	8266
	% within Marriage Type		86.2%	1.1%	12.7%	100%	85.9%	1.2%	12.9%	100%
Spanish Man and Spanish Woman Española	Recount		143241	618	13831	157690	141608	1228	14854	157690
	% within Marriage Type		90.8%	.4%	8.8%	100%	87.7%	0.8%	9.4%	100%
Total	Recount		172827	1035	20148	194010	170150	1785	22075	194010
	% within Marriage Type		89.1%	.5%	10.4%	100%	100%	0.9%	11.4%	100%

Source: own elaboration from INE data (www.ine.es consulted on 03-11-2009)

Table 4: Women's occupation (% of housewives) according to men's civil status

		Men's Civil Status				
		Single (under 40 years)	Single (over 40 years)	Widower	Divorced	Total
Housewives	Recount	1810	722	155	1374	4061
	% within Civil Status	20,2%	27,7%	37,9%	28,4%	24,2%
Another Activity (Included unemployed women)	Recount	7141	1883	254	3472	12750
	% within Civil Status	79,8%	72,3%	62,1%	71,6%	75,8%
Total	Recount	8951	2605	409	4846	16811
	% within Civil Status	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Source: own elaboration from INE data. (www.ine.es accessed 10-11 2009)

We think that these figures are highly significant and convincing in verifying our initial hypothesis and in homing in on the characteristics of the causes, reasons, motives and expectations which have accompanied the rapid emergence of new mixed couples in Spain. We can generally conclude that there is a large group, though not a majority, of Spanish men who are characterized by having had previous relationships with Spanish women rooted in a traditional gender model, who are looking for a type of woman who will supposedly allow them to maintain this type of relationship despite the changes which have occurred in Spanish women's gender roles in recent years. On the other hand however, we mustn't forget that there is also another large group of Spanish men, generally young, who enter a mixed relationship as a result, not of gender considerations, but rather because of their now standard incorporation in the global marriage supermarket made possible by the onset of new information and communication technologies.

Table 5: women's educational level according to men's civil status

Women's Educational Level		Men's Civil Status				
		Single (under 40 years)	Single (over 40 years)	Widower	Divorced	Total
Primary Education	Recount	857	457	103	697	2114
	% within Civil Status of Man	14.2%	24.9%	36.7%	19.9%	18.1%
Secondary Education (first stage)	Recount	1931	616	87	1283	3917
	% within Civil Status of Man	32.0%	33.6%	31.0%	36.7%	33.6%
Secondary Education (second stage)	Recount	1652	419	54	878	3003
	% within Civil Status of Man	27.4%	22.9%	19.2%	25.1%	25.8%
Higher Education	Recount	1599	340	37	641	2617
	% within Civil Status of Man	26.5%	18.6%	13.2%	18.3%	22.5%
Total	Recount	6039	1832	281	3499	11651
	% within Civil Status of Man	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

As an extension of this first approach we need to go beyond our initial expectations and to monitor the development of real gender relations within these mixed couples with men who wish to form a traditional home, and also discover the motivations and profiles of bi-national marriages between Spanish women and foreign men.

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