

AÏCHA LIMBADA, *La nuit de noces. Une histoire de l'intimité conjugale*
(Paris: La Découverte, 2023)

Like other valuable historical works from France and the rest of the world, the present work was initially a PhD thesis. It was truly exceptional since it received the Ary Scheffer award in 2022 and was published the following year by the Parisian La Découverte publishing house. A very desirable path for a thesis, indeed.

You can easily understand how justifiable the recognition this book received is after reading it. First of all, it tackles a subject which is extremely difficult to research: how is it possible for a historian to study the most intimate event in the life of someone who lived in France during the 19th century? Or, in other words, how can a historian peek into the marital bed of two young French newlyweds, where they consummate their marriage (or not) on the very night of their wedding? You must be imaginative and persistent to achieve the impossible, the way Aïcha Limbada did.

I must confess from the start that my reviews and evaluations of PhD theses are not necessarily commendatory. I always desperately try to find the shortcomings and the errors of the works I analyze. I tend to dismantle them piece by piece, although I never forget to write about the overall harmony they had had before I tore them apart. For all that, this time I was speechless! This thesis' demonstration has no faults, or perhaps it dazzled me to the point that I was at a loss for words. I cannot clearly explain this myself, but, for what is certain, I will further present what I appreciated about Aïcha Limbada's flawless work.

This history book makes you devour it in one sitting, which proves just how well-written it is. After reading the title, you dive into the book, find yourself with no way out, because the subject is so enchanting that it captivates you completely. Once you have gone through the summary and the first few pages, it is impossible to put it down. It keeps you spellbound in a reading frenzy until you reach the end. This, at least, has been my experience.

But what exactly makes this book so remarkable? It is admittedly very ingenious, given the complexity of its subject, due to the reasons I have already mentioned. It must be the *smartest* history book I have read in a while. The first thing that comes to mind is the narrative structure. The first chapter introduces us into the imaginary of the wedding night. In the next two, the author examines the renowned ignorance of the Victorian era bourgeoisie girls regarding sexual matters and the measures taken to compensate for this juvenile lack of knowledge.. From the fourth chapter onwards, we, as readers, are invited to attend a wedding, from the reception all the way to the marital bed. The author aims to write a history of the wedding night's imaginary and representations, while also capturing the concrete experiences of the young newlyweds and their entourage on that day of

celebration. Aïcha Limbada goes beyond mere representations in her endeavour to provide a realistic depiction of a young couple's first night. She aims to render their caresses, whispers of pleasure or cries of disgust, as if watching from the shadows as the consummation of the marriage is either a success or a failure. Her desire to render the experiences of those who participated in the wedding night as accurately as possible is hard to accomplish.

One needs access to particular historical sources, namely the ecclesiastical court records, which, after great efforts, Aïsha Limbada managed to examine. They comprise the Canonical Causes for Matrimonial Dispensations, which state the conditions for divorce, allowed by the Catholic Church only in particular situations mentioned in the Canon law. At any rate, canonical matrimonial procedures rarely took place between 1816 and 1884, as the right to civil divorce was prohibited in France, meaning a couple divorced in religious terms could not restart their lives through remarriage. However, things changed in 1884 and those who wanted to obtain a religious divorce could speak to the ecclesiastical court of their diocese. Unfortunately, these archives are kept under lock and key by the Church, their rightful owner according to the French laws. I wonder what reasons the French Catholic Church could possibly have to deny access to the documents of a religious divorce process from, say, 1874?! Its higher reasons remain unfathomable to ordinary people like us. Luckily, historians have a God of their own who, in such situations, left the second instance to the Holy See (Congrégation du Concile and, from 1908, the Rote romaine tribunal), where the cases in which the first instance dissolved the marriage arrived from all over the country. From 1884 onwards, many of them were solved by the new instances and their transcripts are accessible up until 1922.

The author inspected them and extracted her most valuable pieces of information about the wedding night. Nit-pickers will say that truth has a scratched face, even in courtrooms. They are, in fact, right, but Aïcha Limbada has a sharp eye when it comes to her sources. Thus, she is perfectly aware of the fact that it is possible that both parts could hide their real motives, be partial or outright wrong. Nevertheless, the courtroom remains one of the most reliable social environments where truth can be brought to light.

The author has proven herself equally capable of using a wide array of particularly diverse sources when it comes to the imaginary of the wedding night and its representations – the sources range from the figurative and fictional to the medical. She was aware, as we all should be, that such sources are double-edged: they are depictive, yet alter (and therefore, manipulate) the social world they describe, creating a new one that is, in fact, equally real. In other words, these writings and representations may sometimes be works of fiction, but they are nevertheless important parts of a fluid social reality.

Speaking of sources, the author does not shy away from using fiction as a significant source for her thesis. The writings of George Sand, Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Guy de Maupassant, Émile Zola and the Goncourt brothers are extensively and freely used as historical sources. This might seem rather obvious to those knowledgeable about French historiographies, which have used works of fiction for their studies of the 19th century since forever. My observation was not meant for the French public, but for the Romanian readers,

as local historiography hardly ever uses such “secondary” sources, perhaps because until recently there have been no consistent research paths for the study of imaginaries and social representations.

Even though this work focuses mainly on the essentially urban bourgeois marriage, it also tries to cover the topic of marriage within the peasant, noble and working class segments of society. The author approaches what the folklorist Arnold Van Gennep called the traditional “marital rite,” which consisted of the traditional elements of the celebrations: the wedding table, the ball, the newlyweds’ departure towards the marital room, the consumption of the marriage, the relentless inquiries made by the entourage who was always on the other side of the bedroom door and the two spouses’ triumphant emergence from the marital room. The peasant version of the wedding night in the 19th century was public, rather than intimate. The bourgeoisie tried to separate itself from this pattern at the beginning of the 20th century by introducing the concept of going on the honeymoon immediately after the religious ritual. Nevertheless, this custom spread among the other classes starting from the 1860s.

We must note the author’s remarkable attention to circumstances and nuances, because she knows how diverse France was during the 19th century. For instance, when the author discusses women’s sexual ignorance before marriage, she does not aim to actually establish the number of wives who were sexually ignorant. The goal was, in fact, to explore the means by which this ignorance had actually been utterly fabricated. Nuptial ignorance, as she calls it, was not merely a fault of some kind of negligence on the part of passive or indolent families, but something deliberately created (p. 52).

According to previous research, it was usually the upper classes who lacked this knowledge. The perfect victims were catholic, young girls from the urban bourgeoisie, or from poorer families who were also devout Catholics. It is automatically believed that girls from rural areas were better informed about what would happen from the first night of marriage onwards. This is not far from the truth, but the situation was more complicated than that, like the archives inspected by the author prove. As reported by testimonies from northern France about a peasant marriage which took place in 1886, the young woman was completely clueless about her marital duties, apart from the domestic ones. At the turn of the 20th century, there were even more such cases coming from the urban social classes, revealing the same ignorance.

I have yet another aspect to mention about Aïcha Limbada’s work, namely her writing style. She is both a talented historian and an excellent writer. She surprised me on many occasions with her clear theoretical explanations and especially with her narrative refinement, which imbues the entire thesis. This work is both creative and pleasant to read, which is a noteworthy accomplishment for a history book.

In conclusion, I would like to express my delight with the feminist subtleties of the approach. The subject is overtly analysed in order to capture the power dynamics within couples and their manifestations during the first night of marriage, which is considered the ultimate expression of the gender norms supported by society, as well as a context that

shaped them (p.11). It would have been a shame to overlook such a perspective, given the existence of Simone de Beauvoir's *The second sex* and Pierre Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination*.

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