Megan Fellows

What makes a successful marriage?

Last October my parents celebrated their 27th wedding anniversary and I thought to myself, “Holy cow 27 years is a really long time to be married to the same person!” As the months since their anniversary have gone by and I had my “aha!” moment my mother and I have started to have more conversations about her marriage and how she decided to marry my father. Yes, my parents love each other very much, but there were many other factors that played into their decision to get married. In my mother’s opinion and mine, a successful marriage consists of common morals, plans for the future, similar child rearing beliefs and just plain being able to handle the personality of your significant other. In Cliggett’s *Grains from Grass* it came to my attention that the Gwembe people’s definition of a successful marriage is much different than my mothers and my own.

I began to think about the concept of bride-wealth and began to realize that the Gwembe women do not necessarily have a choice in who they marry. It is their father’s choice and the daughter could often be “sold” to the highest bidder regardless of her feelings toward her potential husband. This practice struck me as extremely unfair and unjust! I could not imagine a life in which I do not have the opportunity to choose the man that I am going to marry based on the set of ideals that my mother and I had discussed. But yet, these Gwembe women were being subjected to unhappy marriages. I then thought it was very wrong of me to call these women unhappy because their list of factors that would constitute a successful marriage could be very different than mine. I gathered that a successful
marriage according to the Gwembe women would be having a husband with lots of land and cattle. A husband with a reasonable number of wives so that labor could be divided equally among the matrilineal lines, but not too many wives that the husband must abandon his older wives when food is scarce. A husband who.....???

An example of one of the factors that is on my list, but not necessarily the Gwembe women’s list for a successful marriage is the concept of paternal and maternal child-rearing. Both of my parents have been present in about equal proportions in my childhood. They made decisions together on how my brother and I should be raised before they got married to make sure that many of their ideals would align so that they would have a successful marriage and family life. However, in the Gwembe valley the mothers are responsible for their children, while the fathers make no claim to the children, but benefit from the fruits of their labor. It can be easily derived from this point that child-rearing strategies do not play a large role in the marital process.

Concluding thoughts:
I am aware that people have different definitions of a successful marriage all across the world, but these were just a few example that laid out how the Gwembe women’s definition of a successful marriage was much different than my mother’s and my own.