

Rethinking the Communities of the Marginalized: Friendly Societies in Response to Systemic Oppression and Strategies for Better Futures

Scholars have long studied social clubs, communities, and associations formed in Ancient Greece and have sought to understand their purposes. They often explained such community-building practices as infrastructures formed in response to regimes and the lack of state institutions. Furthermore, they argued that the rise of such communities in the Hellenistic period was a result of political dissolution and the need to replace state institutions with civic ones. However, rethinking the same institutions through the involvement of marginalized groups reveals a new aspect: people who were deemed to have no stake in such regimes adopted and adapted associations originally founded by freeborn citizens for their own benefit, solidarity, and better futures. While they shaped these civic institutions to surpass or circumvent their marginalized status, they also celebrated a communal identity and newfound links in a hostile space.

Building on this perspective, I aim to examine enslaved and formerly enslaved women who utilized associations to overcome the limitations of their status, secure better conditions, and support their communities. In particular, the use of *koinonia* (friendly societies) by women, and the practice of raising interest-free loans from a group of lenders, can help us uncover the frequency of such practices among marginalized communities. Moreover, comparative analysis demonstrates similar structures around the world in different periods: *susu* in the Caribbean and West Africa, *jam 'iyya* in the Levant, *tanda* in Mexico and Central America, *arisan* in Southeast Asia, *altın günü* in Turkey, benevolent societies in the U.S. South, as well as similar practices of women in diaspora communities—all of which played important roles in coping with marginalization and hierarchical structures. Nevertheless, these support networks are usually

understood as forms of “quiet” resistance: strategies for better conditions and futures do not disrupt the functioning of oppressive systems but paradoxically maintain them. Economic and political systems rely on community initiatives and self-help actions to sustain perpetual cycles of marginalization by extracting effort and labor.

This paper will examine these practices of community-making through a gendered lens and signal new directions in feminist historiography for understanding ancient and contemporary political possibilities.

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