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Other than Mother: On Childlessness as Part of the Social Identity of *Nadītu* Women

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Abstract

In Old Babylonian society, nadītu and other women who held religious offices were not allowed to bear children. Traditionally, this taboo on childbearing has been explained as a taboo on sex (chastity) or a taboo on blood (cultic impurity). I believe these traditional explanations to be faulty and inadequate, and suggest an alternative approach based on the concepts of alterity and constructed social identity. By not fitting the norm of their social group, viz. women, by definition birth giving beings, they are 'othered' as non-birth-giving-beings, which indeed is the literal meaning of nadītu: 'the fallow (woman).' However, their 'otherness' is not conceived as negative or problematic, on the contrary, it added greatly to their social status as a privileged group within society. As such, their childlessness was an important part of their social identity.

Keywords: *Childlessness; nadītu women; Old Babylonian period; otherness; social identity*

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Introduction

In Old Babylonian society, various classes of women, such as *nadītu*'s, *ugbabtu*'s, *kulmašītu*'s and *qadištu*'s, remained childless. They are generally considered to be priestesses, although little is known about their religious or cultic role in society.[2] Most of them were associated with a religious institution including serving as staff, which was part of or closely related to the temple of the deity to whom they were dedicated. Some of them, such as the *nadītu*'s of Marduk, the *kulmašītu*'s of Annunītum, and the *qadištu*'s of Adad were married and provided their husbands with a second wife to bear children, others, such as the *nadītu*'s of Ninurta, Zababa, and Šamaš did not marry.[3]

By far the most attested and therefore famous ones are the *nadītu*'s of Šamaš from Sippar, who did not marry and were associated with the local *gagûm*, a religious and economic institution that was part of or closely related to the Ebabbar temple. They are primarily known from the thousands of economic and legal documents in which the (permanent or temporary) transfer of property is recorded and in which they

2 Apart from 'priestesses,' *nadītu*'s are also often referred to as 'nuns' or 'conventuals.' However, the bias of superimposing these modern equivalents contributes to the misunderstanding of the ancient titles, as already noted by Susandra J. van Wyk, "Prostitute, Nun or "Man-Woman": Revisiting the Position of the Old Babylonian *Nadiātu* Priestesses," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 42, no. 2 (2015): 113. Therefore, I prefer to use the Akkadian/neutral *nadītu* (woman) (plural: *nadītu*'s or *nadītu* women) instead of translating it. The same goes for the other classes of women and related terms such as *gagûm*, mostly translated as 'cloister' (see also below).

3 A recent overview can be found in Lucile Barberon, *Les religieuses et le culte de Marduk dans le royaume de Babylone* (Paris: SEPOA, 2012), 108.

play active economic roles as buyers and lessors of real estate, creditors and testatrixes.[4] Indeed, being unmarried childless women, they played an important economic role as keepers and enlargers of a part of the family estate which could be transferred undivided to the next generation through them.[5] This practice, however, was not at the root of their unmarried childless status, which was linked to their institutional status but proved very useful in managing family property within the wealthy urban elites. Notwithstanding the economic benefit that resulted, the origin of their institutional childlessness remains in large measure obscure.

Traditionally the taboo on childbearing has been interpreted as a taboo on sex: these women were expected to remain sexually pure and lead chaste lives. In addition, their cultic purity is cited: contact with blood caused cultic impurity, which made childbirth, pre-eminently a bloody affair, cultically very impure. However, I believe the taboo on sex and cultic impurity to be inadequate as explanations for the institutional childlessness of

[4] The *nadītu*'s of Šamaš have been extensively studied by Rivkah Harris, "The Organisation and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 6, no. 2 (July 1963), 121-157, "The *Nadītu* Woman," in *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim*, ed. Robert D. Biggs and John A. Brinkman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 106-135, *Ancient Sippar. A Demographic Study of an Old Babylonian City (1894-1595 B.C.)* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archeologisch Instituut, 1975), 142-208 and 302-31. Recent studies are Katrien De Graef, "*Cherchez la femme!* The Economic Role of Women in Old Babylonian Sippar," in *The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Brigitte Lion and Cécile Michel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 270-295, and "Puppets on a String? On Female Agency in Old Babylonian Economy," in *Studying Gender in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Saana Svärd and Agnès Garcia-Ventura (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2018), 133-156.

[5] De Graef, "*Cherchez*" and "Puppets".

these women. In what follows, I re-examine the existing explanations, and propose an alternative approach, building on the concepts of alterity and constructed social identity.

The idea of 'othering' is not explicitly referred to in the Babylonian written record. And although one could argue that the concept of 'otherness'—as opposed to that of 'sameness' and resulting in the notions of in-and out-groups — existed throughout human history, the idea of a constructed collective social identity involving in-group identification and out-group discrimination, and the term 'othering' to denote the practice of excluding those who do not fit the norm of the social group, have been developed within post-modernism.[6] As such, applying the modern concepts of 'otherness' and 'othering' onto the past is in se anachronistic. This being said, such an approach can offer new insights and can contribute to our understanding how ancient societies functioned, as various recent studies show.[7] Whereas, in general, the 'other' is negatively conceptualised, this does not always need to be the case. In her study on the tattooed body in the ancient Near East, Melissa Adendorff distinguishes between honourable and shameful tattoos. As such, 'othering' occurred

[6] Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Construction of Collective Identities: Some Analytical and Comparative Indications," *European Journal of Social Theory* 1, no. 2 (1998): 229-254.

[7] Recent studies applying the concept of 'otherness' on the ancient Near East include Melissa Adendorff, *Othered Flesh: Social-Scientific and Critical Spatial Investigations into the Tattooed Ancient Near Eastern Body as Space and Body in Space* (PhD dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2015), Joanna Töyräänvuori, "Mapping the Margins of Scrolls and Clay Tablets: The Construction of Identity in the Ancient World," *Die Welt des Orients* 50, no. 2 (2020), 205-215, and Ilan Peled, "The Deviant Villain. The Construction of Villainy as Deviant Otherness in Mesopotamian Royal Rhetoric," AVAR: *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Life and Society in the Ancient Near East* 1, no. 1 (2022), 51-87.

based on the honour or shame of the tattooed individual, resulting, among other things, in affording or restricting free access to public spaces.[8] Along the same line, Erich S. Gruen argues that the assessment of the 'other' by classical authors shows a more complex set of attitudes than is commonly supposed, and offers an alternative approach, arguing that they had far more mixed, nuanced, and complex opinions about other peoples.[9]

Contrary to the economic roles that *nadītu* (and similar) women played in Old Babylonian society, which are abundantly documented, the origin of their institutional childlessness — which was obviously related to their social and economic status — is never explicitly addressed in the extant written records. Looking at it through the modern lens of 'otherness' and 'othering' may contribute to our understanding of their childless status — beyond the current traditional and inadequate explanations.

My focus is mainly on the *nadītu*'s of Šamaš from Sippar, as they are the most numerous ones represented in our sources.

No Sex, No Children

Traditionally, the ban on having children has been interpreted as a ban on sexual relations. The reason is obvious: not having

[8] Melissa Adendorff, *Othered Flesh*, 253-254.

[9] Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Joanna Töyäänvuori, "Mapping," 211.

sex results in not having children. In other words, the childlessness of these women was not an end in itself but merely the result of them not being allowed to have sexual relations. The question of whether these women were prohibited from engaging in sexual relations, and if so, why, is therefore crucial. The supposed taboo on sex is usually explained as the religious command of chastity. For example, as recently as 2016 we read in Stol's volume on women in the ancient Near East that these women were expected to remain sexually pure and lead chaste lives.[10] This interpretation is based on the idea that these women were nuns, living a secluded life in a cloister where austerity, modesty and chastity prevailed.[11] However, as I argued earlier, the *gagûm* is by no means to be understood as a cloister or segregated walled area where *nadītu*'s resided and which they were not allowed to leave, nor should these women be regarded as nuns.[12] This view clearly is a misconception, inspired by the Roman Catholic cloisters and nuns of the later Western world.

A close reading of the sources showed that the *gagûm* was both an institution and an area within the city, parallel to the *kārum*, which was the harbour district or city quarter destined for

[10] Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, trans. Helen and Mervyn Richardson (Boston-Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 570.

[11] Rivkah Harris, *Ancient Sippar. A Demographic Study of an Old Babylonian City (1894-1595 B.C.)* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archeologisch Instituut, 1975), 188-99 and 302-12, Stol, *Women*, 584-604.

[12] Katrien De Graef, "*In Taberna Quando Sumus*. On Taverns, *Nadītum* Women, and the *Gagûm* in Old Babylonian Sippar," in *Gender and Methodology in the Ancient Near East: Approaches from Assyriology and Beyond,* ed. Stephanie L. Budin, Megan Cifarelli, Agnès Garcia-Ventura and Adelina Millet Albà (Barcelona: Institut del Pròxim Orient Antic/University of Barcelona Editions, 2019), 77-115.

traders but also functioned as a trading association or community of merchants. The *gagûm* functioned as a religious and economic institution including various offices, in close relation to or as part of the Ebabbar temple, within the context of which *nadītu* (and similar) women fulfilled their duties. At the same time, it was the name of a city quarter, where *nadītu* (and similar) women but also men owned houses, located near the Ebabbar temple and the city wall which had a gate named after the city quarter to which it gave access.[13]

Together with the 'nuns-in-the-cloister' theory, the idea of chastity also disappears: after all, there is no evidence for the existence of such a 'vow of chastity' in the cuneiform sources. As Finkelstein already noted in 1970,[14] a ban on bearing children did not necessarily demand chastity. On the contrary, methods of intercourse that would avoid pregnancy and knowledge of contraceptive and abortive drugs imply that these women were certainly able to have sexual relations without the risk of pregnancy. Indeed, heterosexual anal intercourse is referred to in the texts and there is no evidence that it was condemned. On the contrary, it seems to have been an approved, or at least applied, method for *nadītu*'s and the like in order to maintain

[13] De Graef, "*In Taberna,*" 101-9.

[14] Jacob J. Finkelstein, "On Some Recent Studies in Cuneiform Law," review of *Symbolae Iuridicae et Historicae Martino David Dedicatae*, by Johan A. Ankum, Robert Feenstra, and Wilhelmus F. Leemans. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90, no. 2 (April-June 1970): 246-47.

their institutional childless state.[15] Other ways of preventing or terminating pregnancy were certainly known: the ancient Babylonians were well acquainted with medical conditions typical of women, including pregnancy tests and potions and drugs made of plants with abortifacient and/or contraceptive properties.[16] Moreover, the so-called *šilip rēmim* adoptions in which infants 'drawn-from-the-womb' were given for adoption by a *nadītu* seem to imply that they occasionally got pregnant.[17]

Last, but not least, it is important to note that within Mesopotamian religion, sexuality was not frowned upon. On the contrary, the sexual act and the sexual organs were unambiguously extolled. This is evidenced by many an erotic

[15] Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (London-New York: Routledge, 1994), 218-19, Robert D. Biggs, "Conception, Contraception, and Abortion in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Wisdom, Gods and Literature. Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W. G. Lambert*, ed. Andrew R. George and Irving L. Finkel (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 10, Stephanie L. Budin, "Female Sexuality in Mesopotamia," in *Women in Antiquity. Real Women across the Ancient World*, ed. Stephanie L. Budin and Jean M. Turfa, 16. London: Routledge, 2016, van Wyk, "Prostitute," 113.

[16] Biggs, "Conception," 12, Barbara Böck, "Medicinal Plants and Medicaments Used for Conception, Abortion, and Fertility Control in Ancient Babylonia," *Journal Asiatique* 301, no. 1 (2013): 36-40, JoAnn Scurlock, *Sourcebook for Ancient Mesopotamian Medicine* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 571-619.

[17] Jacob J. Finkelstein, "*šilip rēmim* and Related Matters," in *Kramer Anniversary Volume: Cuneiform Studies in Honor of Samuel Noah Kramer*, ed. Barry L. Eichler (Kevelaer/Neukirchen: Butzon & Bercker/Neukircher Verlag, 1976), 187-194, Klaas R. Veenhof, "Two *šilip rēmim* Adoptions from Sippar," in *Cinquante-deux reflexions sur le Proche-Orient ancien offertes en homage à Léon De Meyer*, ed. Hermann Gasche, Michel Tanret, Caroline Janssen and Ann Degraeve (Leuven: Peeters, 1994), 143-153.

passage in Mesopotamian myths, hymns, prayers, incantations, and other pieces of literature.[18]

Cultic Purity

Another explanation given for the obligatory childlessness of the *nadītu* (and other related classes of) women is that of cultic purity. It is often argued that contact with blood caused cultic impurity, and, although this was not restricted to women, it is obviously applied to women when menstruating and during childbirth, which makes them pre-eminently impure beings. As such, women would have periodically had to leave the palace of Mari,[19] and/or were even separated from their family or social group altogether during their menstruation.[20] Defiled women would have been forced to regularly purify themselves at public fountains, or to cleanse ritually even before entering town, as was the case in Nippur, where at the 'Gate of Impure Women' a large pool was located.[21] With particular respect to *nadītu* women, rubbing blood on their cheeks was a way to punish, dishonour and even permanently desecrate them, according to

[18] Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, "Sexuality and Religion in Mesopotamia," *Religion Compass* 2, no. 2 (2008), 119-133, Budin, "Female Sexuality".

[19] Nele Ziegler, Le Harem de Zimrî-Lîm. La population féminine des palais d'après les archives royales de Mari (Paris: SEPOA, 1999), 32.

[20] Walther Sallaberger, "Körperliche Reinheit und soziale Grenzen in Mesopotamien," in *Reinheit*, ed. Peter Burschel and Christoph Marx (Vienna: Böhlau, 2011), 23-4.

[21] Marten Stol, "Nippur A. II Altbabylonisch." *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 9 (1998), 540, Michaël Guichard and Lionel Marti, "Purity in Ancient Mesopotamia: the Paleo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian Periods," in *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism*, ed. Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013), 74-5.

Rosel Pientka-Hinz.[22] In the Neo-Assyrian version of the myth of Atram-hasīs, it is stated that pregnant women were isolated while giving birth.[23] The impure nature of childbirth is cited as an explanation for this confinement, although it does not seem inappropriate for a woman to give birth in a separate, safe, sacred space, in order for the midwife to prepare and perform the necessary tasks, but above all in order to protect the woman in labour against baby-snatching demons and other dangers.[24]

However, caution is due when it comes to the cultic impurity of menstruating or birth giving women, for in most cases these interpretations and assumptions are based on biblical data which are then projected upon a Mesopotamian context, as was brilliantly demonstrated by Érica Couto-Ferreira and Agnès Garcia-Ventura.[25] Indeed, no evidence is found in the cuneiform sources suggesting women were obliged to seclude themselves during their menses: it is a misconception inspired by the biblical purity system and the fact that most scholars consider the

[22] Rosel Pientka-Hinz, "Angeschmiert! – die Entweihung einer *nadītum*-Priesterin." *Altorientalische Forschungen* 35, no. 2 (2008): 254-261.

[23] Wilfred G. Lambert and Alan R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs. The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 63, Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible. Its Mediterranean Setting* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 2000), 114.

[24] van der Toorn, Karel, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave. The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman*, trans. Sara J. Denning-Bolle (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 85-6, De-Whyte Janice P. E., *Wom(b)an: A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2018), 45-6, Scurlock, JoAnn, "Baby-snatching Demons, Restless Souls and the Dangers of Childbirth: Medico-Magical Means of Dealing with Some of the Perils of Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Incognita* 2 (1991), 137-185.

[25] Érica Couto-Ferreira and Agnès Garcia-Ventura, "Engendering Purity and Impurity in Assyriological Studies: A Historiographical Overview," *Gender & History* 25, no. 3 (November 2013): 513-528.

relationship between menstruation and impurity to be self-evident and universal. The same goes for the case in which two *nadītu*'s were accused of giving false testimony and hence were punished: as Charpin already noted,[26] it is more likely to interpret that they were punished by hitting their cheeks until they bled, rather than blood being rubbed on their cheeks as an act of transmission of impurity in order to desecrate them in their cultic-religious function.

This being said, the notion of 'purity' is omnipresent in religious, ritual, cultic, and legal contexts, implying it was of utmost importance, not only in matters of religion but for society as a whole.[27] However, as Érica Couto-Ferreira and Agnès Garcia-Ventura note, the vocabulary used in these texts shows a much broader range of semantic nuances going beyond the narrow notion of ethical and moral purity as referred to in the modern translation. Moreover, not only women, but also men, objects, and contexts could be considered (un)clean, (im)proper or (un)acceptable.[28] In other words, the cultic impurity (or general uncleanliness) caused by blood (and/or other fluids or substances) was not restricted to women, and it seems therefore unlikely that the cultic purity of *nadītu* (and similar) women was

[26] Dominique Charpin, "Amendes et châtiments prévus dans les contrats paléo-babyloniens," *in La faute et sa punition dans les civilisations orientales*, ed. Jean-Marie Durand, Thomas Römer and Jean-Pierre Mahé (Louvain/Paris/Walpole: Peeters, 2012), 19.

[27] Michaël Guichard and Lionel Marti, "Purity," 47-8.

[28] Érica Couto-Ferreira and Agnès Garcia-Ventura, "Engendering," 516-7.

the basis of the taboo on childbearing: having given birth or not, would not have made them more or less cultic impure in general.

All in all, it seems that the most commonly cited and largely accepted explanations for the childlessness of the *nadītu* (and similar) women, viz. chastity and/or cultic purity, are faulty or at least inconclusive. Attributing chastity and purity to the *nadītu* (and similar) women does not contribute to our understanding of their position in society but above all reveals biased presumptions and the projection of contemporary sexual taboos, inspired by biblical and Western Christian concepts, onto Mesopotamian classes of women who do not fit the patriarchal mould of the (wife and) mother, as van Wyk pointed out.[29] But if chastity and/or cultic purity were not, or at least not mainly, at the root of the taboo on childbearing, then what was? An important question to be asked therefore is: how did the Babylonians themselves perceive and deal with the childless status of particular groups of women in society?

Birth Control

Interesting information in this regard is to be found in the myth of Atram-hasīs, in which childless priestesses are considered as one of the measures taken by the god Enki to control mankind's

[29] van Wyk, "Prostitute," 113. There were other classes of women who did not fall into the wife-and-mother category, such as the *harimtu* ('single woman' or 'freewoman'), see Assante, Julia, "The kar.kid/*harimtu*, Prostitute or Single Woman? A Critical Review of the Evidence," *Ugarit Forschungen* 30 (1998), 5-96 and most recently Stephanie L. Budin, *Freewomen, Patriarchal Authority, and the Accusation of Prostitution* (London-New York: Routledge, 2021), 21-61. These, however, fall out of the scope of the current article.

numbers. Indeed, in the Old Babylonian version of the myth, Enki instructs Nintu, the birth-goddess and creatress of destinies, in the reorganisation of the life system. The first part of his words (ca. five lines) is lost, but he continues his speech saying "Moreover, let there be only one-third of the people, (let there be) among the people women who bear and women who do not bear, let there be among the people a *pāšittu* demon to snatch the baby from the lap of her who bore it; install *ugbabtu* women, *entu* women, and egişītu women, and let them be taboo and stop childbirth."[30] The remainder of the column is heavily damaged, but traces of other classes of women, such as *nadītu*, *kulmašītu* (?) and *qadištu* women can be found in the following lines.[31] So, in addition to the mortality of man (which he instructed Nintu to establish for man in the first part of his speech?), Enki orders the reduction of mankind to a third by introducing natural sterility, infant mortality and institutional childlessness. In other words, *nadītu* (and similar groups of) women were, according to this myth, invested with the role of demographic regulators. It is noteworthy to say the least, that the author(s) understood birth control to be the original motivation for this cultic practice. This was already noted by Anne D. Kilmer, who further suggested to

[30] Lambert and Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs*, 102-3. Lambert and Millard, *op. cit*. translate the first line "In addition let there be a third category among the peoples", see also Wolfram von Soden, "Das altbabylonische Atramchasis-Mythos," in *Weisheitstexte, Mythen und Epen (Texte aus dem Umwalt des Alten Testaments Band III)* by Karl Hecker *et al.* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), 644. I tend to follow Stol, *Birth*, 213, who interprets the first line as "Moreover, let there be one-third among the people," as already suggested by Anne D. Kilmer, "The Mesopotamian Concept of Overpopulation and Its Solution as Reflected in the Mythology," *Orientalia* 41, no. 2 (1972), 171.

[31] Barberon, *Les religieuses*, 110-1, fn. 659.

reconsider the significance of institutionally imposed infertility in the cult in the light of this passage: if the gods are not in favour of unlimited fertility, fertility becomes a privilege instead of a right. If the avoidance of overpopulation is a condition for the continued existence of man on earth, birth control becomes a matter not only for nature and the gods, but also for man himself.[32] This certainly is an interesting line of thinking, and one could interpret the institutional childlessness of *nadītu* (and similar) women as a way of complying with the will of the gods to avoid overpopulation.

However, being a myth, it aims to explain why institutional childlessness existed, rather than imposing it as a birth control measure. Moreover, imposed childlessness among a relatively limited class of women within the urban elites could not possibly have led to effective birth control in the entire population. Especially as some classes of these women, such as the *nadītu*'s of Marduk, were married and provided their husbands with a secondary wife to bear children. Indeed, like any wife, they must have been required to provide their husband with offspring, a duty which was opposed to their obligation not to bear children. This could be solved by adopting children or using a surrogate mother. The second option is the most documented: this could be either a female servant who served as surrogate mother, or a secondary wife, who was often adopted as a sister of the principal wife and in which case the maternity was shared between both

[32] Kilmer, "The Mesopotamian Concept," 173.

wives. Remarkable in these arrangements is that although the motherhood of the principal wife was not biological, it was legally recognized.[33] In other words: women bound by the obligation of institutional childlessness could not be biological mothers but could be legal ones. And this seems to have been the case not only for those who married but also for those who did not, such as the *nadītu*'s of Šamaš from Sippar, who could adopt a young *nadītu* (related or not) to appoint as her heiress (*rēdit warkatīša*) in exchange for sustenance, although there is no consensus whether these are to be considered as real adoptions or rather apprenticeship agreements.[34] Also on other occasions, albeit not very frequent, *nadītu*'s of Šamaš act as legal mothers and are explicitly designated as 'mother' in the contracts, viz. when they adopt a girl to emancipate her in exchange for sustenance or to give her in marriage.[35] Contrary to the *nadītu*'s

[33] Barberon, *Les religieuses*, 225-234, Josué J. Justel, "Women, Gender and Law at the Dawn of History. The Evidence of the Cuneiform Sources," in *Women in Antiquity. Real Women across the Ancient World*, ed. Stephanie L. Budin and Jean M. Turfa (London: Routledge, 2016), 81.

[34] De Graef, "Puppets," 142.

[35] BAP 90, CT 47 40/a, BE 6/1 96, Klaas R. Veenhof, "Three Old Babylonian Marriage Contracts Involving *nadītum* and *šugītum*," in *Reflets des deux fleuves. Volume de mélanges offerts à André Finet*, ed. Marc Lebeau and Philippe Talon (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 181-3, Guido Suurmeijer, "He Took Him as His Son. Adoption in Old Babylonian Sippar," *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 104, no. 1 (2010), 23-7, Seth Richardson, "A Light in the *Gagûm* Window: the Sippar Cloister in the Late Old Babylonian Period," in *Opening the Tablet Box: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Benjamin R. Foster*, ed. Sarah Melville and Alice Slotsky (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 340-5. On two occasions, a *nadītu* of Šamaš gives a child in adoption (BE 6/1 17 and BM 97813+, only in the first text is she explicitly designated as 'mother'). In these cases, she might have been the biological mother. However, as the children are already named and it is not mentioned that they were drawn from the womb (*šilip rēmim*), they must have been a certain age, which makes it unlikely that she was their biological mother. It is even possible that the adoptees were (young) adults and that the *nadītu* acted as intermediary.

of Marduk who fulfilled their marital obligations by providing their husbands with children through a female servant or secondary wife, the *nadītu*'s of Šamaš acted legally as mothers only in economic transactions. Their adoptions of these girls are in fact investments: their adoptees are emancipated, apprenticed, and/or appointed as heiress in exchange for sustenance, or are (to be) given in marriage in exchange for a bride price (*terḫatum*).[36] We could thus conclude that with regard to the *nadītu*'s of Šamaš, their mother role was merely an economic role, which brings me to the following point, viz. motherhood, and more particularly the difference between biological and non-biological motherhood.

Motherhood

Indeed, as Érica Couto-Ferreira showed, the concept of motherhood in Mesopotamia was not exclusively bio-physiologically determined, but also socially and culturally constructed. This is also apparent from the semantics of the term *ālittu* 'begetter,' stressing the reproductive aspect of maternity, versus *ummu* 'mother,' alluding to the post birth caring, protecting, counselling aspects of maternity.[37] This motherhood could be exercised independent of biological bonds, and thus in the most diverse contexts, going from wetnurses, over nannies,

[36] De Graef, "Puppets," 142, Richardson, "A Light," 343-4, Suurmeijer, "He Took," 23-7.

[37] Érica Couto-Ferreira, "Being Mothers or Acting (like) Mothers? Constructing Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Women in Antiquity. Real Women across the Ancient World*, ed. Stephanie L. Budin and Jean M. Turfa (London: Routledge, 2016), 25-34.

guardians and instructresses, to even investors in marital potential, as is shown above.

So it seems that the taboo on childbearing was not so much a taboo on motherhood in its broadest sense (socio-cultural construct), but only on its most 'natural' aspect, viz. reproduction (bio-physiological determinant). And here, we touch upon one of the most fundamental elements of the female identity, the essence of femininity, what distinguishes woman from and determines her in relation to man: the ability to give birth, to reproduce. Especially in a patriarchal society as the Mesopotamian one, giving birth and raising children within a familial context was one of the main social roles of women. In light of this view, I would like to propose the hypothesis of 'otherness' as a possible (partial) motivation for the ban on reproduction imposed on the *nadītu* (and similar) women. The abstinence from giving birth fundamentally distinguishes them not only from women in general, but also from women within their social circle of the wealthy urban elites who hold no religious office.

Other than Mother

Reproduction and motherhood were fundamental to the identity of Mesopotamian women, one could even consider fertility the power and influence women exerted in society, as Janice P. E. De-Whyte put it.[38] Barrenness was considered a tragic fate for a wife,

[38] De-Whyte, *Wom(b)an*, 24.

in which case her husband could divorce her or marry an additional wife. Although again, caution is due not to superimpose the biblical notion of barrenness being a disgrace and curse on a Mesopotamian context, there seems to be no doubt that also in Mesopotamia infertility was generally considered to be negative. This is apparent from the literary texts, law codes, proverbs, prayers, and incantations as well as the remedies against barrenness, miscarriage, stillbirth, and other problems occurring during childbirth in the form of medicinal plants, amulets and rituals.[39]

By depriving *nadītu* (and similar) women from giving birth and raising children within a familial context, they were excluded from the normal life of a woman in the patriarchal society of Mesopotamia. By not fitting the norm of the social group, viz. women, by definition birth giving beings, they are 'othered' as non-birth-giving-beings, which indeed is the literal meaning of *nadītu*: 'the fallow (woman)'.

'Otherness' is generally used to describe a subject's condition of non-conformity to social norms as a result of which the 'other' becomes marginalized, alienated.[40] As such, the 'otherness' of a person or group is due less to their non-normativity than to the

[39] Böck, "Medicinal Plants," 27-36, De-Whyte, *Wom(b)an*, 24-52, Scurlock, "Baby-snatching," 137-185, *Sourcebook*, 585-616 Stol, *Birth*, 33-7 and 49-72, Konrad Volk, "Vom Dunkel in die Helligkeit: Schwangerschaft, Geburt und frühe Kindheit in Babylonien und Assyrien," in *Naissance et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité*, ed. Véronique Dasen (Fribourg/Göttingen: Academic Press/Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 2004), 71-92.

[40] Stephen Trombley, "Otherness," in *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought (third edition)*, ed. Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley (Hammersmith: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), 620.

point of view and the discourse of the society who perceives them as 'other.' Central to the construction of 'otherness' is the asymmetrical power relation in which the dominant group imposes the value of its particularity and devalues the particularity of others. Typical examples of such asymmetries of power are the Oriental 'other' vs. the Western 'self' (Orientalism), the black 'other' vs. the white 'self' (racism), and the female 'other' vs. the male 'self' (sexism/misogyny).[41] In other words, the 'other' is usually conceived as a so-called negative category, one that is constituted by the absence-of-it via dichotomy: e.g. woman being the 'other' by absence-of-maleness.[42]

This is not the case with regard to the *nadītu* (and similar) women in Old Babylonian society: contrary to naturally sterile women (and other groups not conforming to the social norm), their 'otherness' by absence-of-giving-birth is not conceived as negative or problematic. On the contrary, intrinsic to their religious and institutional office, their voluntary abstinence from giving birth added greatly to their social status as a privileged group within society. Indeed, as Val Plumwood noted, alternative non-oppressive constructions of 'otherness' can involve reconception of the 'other' as a positively-other-than.[43]

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[41] Jean-François Staszak, "Other/otherness," in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2009).

[42] Val Plumwood, "Feminism and the Logic of Alterity," in *Representing Reason. Feminist Theory and Formal Logic*, ed. Rachel J. Falmange and Marjorie Hass (Lanham-Boulder-New York-Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 52.

[43] Plumwood, "Feminism," 59.

Nadītu (and similar) women were not stigmatized by society for their inability to give birth, as they *deliberately* did not reproduce. By imposing on themselves the taboo on reproduction, the essence of womanhood, they fundamentally distinguish themselves, not only from women in general, but also from the women of their own social circle of elite urbanites who hold no religious office. Their 'otherness' can be seen as a process in social identity formation: by not fitting the norm of their social group, viz. women, by definition birth giving beings, they were, so to speak, exalted above their peers. As such, their social identity is, at least in part, defined by their limitation to give birth.

The institutional childlessness of these women played a dual role in the construction of a collective social identity: not fitting the norm of the social group of women as birth-giving-beings, they were excluded or 'othered,' but at the same time, it allowed identification between the members of the ingroup of elite women holding a religious office.

Conclusion

From the above, it is clear that the explanations generally given for the institutional childlessness of *nadītu* (and similar) women, viz. chastity and cultic purity, are inadequate. Both arguments are misconceptions, to a large extent based on biblical data and/or inspired by present-day Western Christian (Roman Catholic) sexual taboos.

Therefore, I suggest considering 'otherness' as a way in constructing their social identity as childless women: by non-conforming to the social norms of their peer group, viz. women in their traditional roles as mothers, they were excluded and alienated, not only from women in general, but also from their fellow elite townswomen who held no religious office. One could, as Anne D. Kilmer suggested,[44] interpret their 'otherness' as a way of complying with the will of the gods to avoid overpopulation, although in that case, rather than fertility, it seems that voluntary infertility can be considered to be a privilege. For it improved considerably their social position: dispensed from social reproduction, they were free to engage in other, more valued pursuits, both cultic and economic — not to mention the exemption from the risk of dying in childbirth. Especially those who remained not only childless but also unmarried, became socially and economically empowered: as keepers and enlargers of the family estate, they became first-rank businesswomen and as such took over roles usually filled by men.[45] As such, their childlessness can be seen as an important

[44] Kilmer, "The Mesopotamian Concept," 173.

[45] Married women with children could also engage in economic activities, such as the wives of the Old Assyrian merchants, see Michel, Cécile, *Women of Aššur and Kaneš: Texts from the Archives of Assyrian Merchants* (Atlanta: SBL, 2020. The same goes to a smaller extent for wives of Old Babylonian entrepreneurs, see Fiette, Baptiste, "Zinu, Wife and Manager in Old Babylonian Larsa," in *The Mummy Under the Bed. Essays on Gender and Methodology in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Katrien De Graef, Agnès Garcia-Ventura, Anne Goddeeris and Beth Alpert Nakhai (Münster: Zaphon, 2021), *in press*. However, the specific purpose of the economic activities in which *nadītu*'s were primarily engaged as keepers and enlargers of the family differs fundamentally from that of the wives of merchants and entrepreneurs.

part of their social identity. One could even say that they were not childless but rather childfree.