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THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN EARLY CIVILIZATION.¹

THE position of women in early civilization is a subject which, of course, cannot be adequately dealt with in a single paper. All that I can do is to present a few general conclusions, together with some illustrative examples to support those conclusions. The subject is full of difficulties. Not only is the position of women among the lower races variable, but our knowledge of the matter is very defective. It is seldom that a traveler gives us a minute account of the customary rights and duties of women among the people whom he visits. Not infrequently are conflicting statements made by different authorities, or even by the same writer. And, as regards the status of women, as in many other points, we often have reason to suspect that the European visitor expresses his opinion without a full insight into all the facts bearing on the question with which he is dealing.

The popular view is that among the lower races the position of women is one of abject slavery. This opinion is no doubt correct to some extent, so far as certain savage peoples are concerned. Among many of them the husband has the power of life and death over his wife, at least within certain limits and under certain circumstances. The man is often described as the sole proprietor of his wives and daughters, entitled to barter them away, or to dispose of them in any manner he may think proper. Yet it seems that even in cases where the husband's power over his wife is said to be absolute, custom has not left her entirely destitute of rights. Take, for instance, the Australian aborigines, who have long been reputed to be perhaps the greatest oppressors of women on earth. Among certain tribes, at least, if a man kills his wife, her death is avenged by her brothers or kindred, or the husband has to deliver up one of his own sisters for his late wife's friends to put to death. Sometimes he must have the consent of the tribe

¹ Paper presented at the opening meeting of the Sociological Society (London) on April 18, 1904.

for punishing or divorcing his wife. As Dr. Nieboer has pointed out, there are even cases in which a wife, whose husband has been unfaithful to her, may complain of his conduct to the elders of the tribe, and the husband may have to suffer for his fault. In north-west central Queensland the women themselves are on one special occasion allowed to inflict punishment upon the men: at a certain stage of the initiation ceremony

each woman can exercise her right of punishing any man who may have illtreated, abused, or "hammered" her, and for whom she may have waited months or perhaps years to chastise.

These facts ill agree with Mr. Curr's broad statement that among the Australian natives "the husband is the absolute owner of his wife."

Other instances may be added to show that the so-called absolute authority of husbands over their wives is not to be taken too literally. Of the Guiana Indians Mr. I. Thurn observes: "The woman is held to be as completely the property of the man as is his dog. He may sell her if he chooses." But in another place the same writer admits that the women not only influence the men in a quiet way, but that "even if the men were inclined to treat them cruelly—though this is in fact quite contrary to their nature—public opinion would prevent this." Among the Chippewas in North America the women are said to be "as much in the power of the men as any other articles of their property;" yet, at the same time, "they are always consulted, and possess a very considerable influence in the traffic with Europeans, and other important concerns." The Russian traveler Prejevalsky states that among the Mongols a woman is "entirely dependent on her husband;" but on a following page he adds that "in the household the rights of the wife are nearly equal to those of the husband." In Dr. Paulitschke's great monograph on the Somals, Danakil, and Gallas of northeastern Africa the confusion reaches its height. A wife, he observes, has no rights whatever in relation to her husband, being a mere piece of property; and subsequently we learn that she is his equal and "a mistress of her own will."

Among many uncivilized peoples the hardest drudgeries of

life are said to be imposed on the women; all the heavy work is performed by them; their life is an uninterrupted succession of toil and pain. There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of these and similar statements; but, however correct they be, they hardly express the whole truth. In early society—just as among ourselves—each sex has its own pursuits. The man is responsible for the protection of his family and its support. His occupations are such as require strength and ability: fighting, hunting, fishing, the construction of implements for the chase and war, and the building of huts. On the other hand, the principal occupations of the woman are universally of a domestic kind: she procures wood and water, prepares the food, dresses skins, makes clothes, takes care of the children. She, moreover, supplies the household with vegetable food, gathers roots, berries, acorns, and, among agricultural savages, very commonly cultivates the ground. Cattle-raising is generally a masculine pursuit, because it has developed out of the chase. Agriculture, on the other hand, originally devolves on the woman, because it has developed out of collecting seeds and plants. Thus the various occupations of life are divided between the sexes according to definite rules. And though the formation of these rules has undoubtedly been more or less influenced by the egoism of the stronger sex, the essential principle from which they spring lies deeper. They are, on the whole, in conformity with the indications given by nature itself.

There is nothing for which savages and barbarians have been more commonly blamed than the apparently cruel practice of using their women as beasts of burden. As M. Pinart (quoted by Dr. Nieboer) remarks, with special reference to the Indians of Panama, it may indeed seem strange to the superficial observer that the woman should be charged with a heavy load, while the man walking before her carries nothing but his weapons. But a little reflection will make it plain that the man has good reasons for keeping himself free and mobile. The little caravan is surrounded with dangers: when traversing a savannah or a forest a hostile Indian may appear at any moment, or a jaguar or a snake may lie in wait for the travelers. Hence the man must be on the alert, and instantly ready to seize his arms to defend himself and

his family against the aggressor. A similar observation has been made by Dobrizhoffer. He writes:

The luggage being all committed to the women, the Abipones travel armed only with a spear, that they may be disengaged to fight or hunt, if occasion requires.

Moreover, whatever may have been the original reason for allotting a certain occupation exclusively to the one sex, any such restriction has subsequently been emphasized by custom, and in many cases by superstition. It is a common belief that, if a man does a woman's work, he himself will become effeminate; besides, he will be laughed at and called a woman. Among the Beni Ahsen tribe in Morocco, the women of the village where I was staying were quite horrified when one of my men was going to fetch water; they said that they could not allow him to do so, because the fetching of water was a woman's business. So, also, among the Bakongo, a man would be much ridiculed by the women themselves if he wanted to help them in their work in the field.

It is obvious that this division of labor in savage communities is apt to mislead the traveling stranger. He sees the women hard at work and the men idly looking on; and perhaps it does not occur to him that the latter will have to be busy in their turn, within their own sphere of action. What is largely due to custom is taken to be sheer tyranny on the part of the stronger sex, and the wife is pronounced an abject slave of her husband, destitute of all rights. Yet, as a matter of fact, the strict differentiation of work, however burdensome it be to the woman, is itself a source of rights. It gives her authority within the circle which is exclusively hers. In the house she is very commonly an autocrat. Even where she is said to be the slave of the husband, custom may prevent him from parting with a single household article, without first asking the permission of his wife. Nay, in early society women are sometimes the only landowners. As already said, they till the ground, they sow the corn. The soil, therefore, in certain cases is regarded as theirs.

The supreme authority which, among many savage peoples, the husband is said to possess over his wife, appears thus to be

considerably modified by circumstances which have generally been left out of consideration by the generalizer. And we must distinctly and emphatically reject as erroneous the broad statement, often met with, that the lower races, taken as a whole, hold their women in a state of almost complete subjection. Among many of them the married woman, although in the power of the husband, is known to enjoy a remarkable degree of independence, to be treated by him with great consideration, and to exercise no small influence upon him. In several cases she is even stated to be his equal, and in a few his superior. In support of this I shall quote some statements made by reliable observers in various savage lands.

Among many, or most, of the North American Indians the position of women appears to have been anything but degraded. Says Mr. Grinnell:

The Indian woman, it is usually thought, is a mere drudge and slave, but, so far as my observations extend, this notion is wholly erroneous. It is true that the women were the laborers of the camp, that they did all the hard work about which there was no excitement . . . , but they were not mere servants. On the contrary, their position was very honorable. They were consulted on many subjects, not only in connection with family affairs, but in more important and general matters. Sometimes women were even admitted to the councils and spoke there, giving their advice. . . . In ordinary conversation women did not hesitate to interrupt and correct their husbands, when the latter made statements with which they did not agree, and the men listened to them with respectful attention.

Among the Navahoes the women "exert a great deal of influence;" they "are very independent of menial duties, and leave their husbands upon the slightest pretext of dislike;" "by common consent the house and all the domestic gear belong entirely to the wife." Among the Omahas the women had an equal standing in society with the men; both the husband and wife were at the head of the family, and the joint owners of the hut, robes, etc., so that the man could not give away anything if his wife was unwilling. Mr. Morgan says of the Seneca tribe:

Usually the female portion ruled the house and were doubtless clannish enough about it. The stores were in common; but woe to the luckless husband or lover who was too shiftless to do his share of the providing. No matter how

many children, or whatever goods, he might have in the house, he might at any time be ordered to pick up his blanket and budge.

Among the Nootkas, "wives are consulted in matters of trade, and in fact seem to be nearly on terms of equality with their husbands, except that they are excluded from some public feasts and ceremonies." The Thlinkets and Kamchadales held their women in much respect. Concerning the Chukchi, Nordenskjöld states :

The power of the woman appears to be very great. In making the more important bargains, even about weapons and hunting implements, she is, as a rule, consulted, and her advice is taken. A number of things which form women's tools she can barter away on her own responsibility, or in any other way employ as she pleases.

Passing to other quarters of the world: Among the Kandhs, one of the uncivilized tribes of India, women

are uniformly treated with respect; the mothers of families, generally with much honor. Nothing is done either in public or in private affairs without consulting them, and they generally exert a powerful influence upon the councils of their tribes.

They have extraordinary matrimonial privileges. Constancy to her husband is not at all required in a wife, whereas infidelity on the part of a married man is held to be highly dishonorable, and is often punished by deprivation of many social privileges. And a wife may quit her husband at any time, except within a year of her marriage, or when she expects offspring, or within a year after the birth of a child, though, when she quits him, he has a right to reclaim immediately from her father the whole sum paid for her. Of the Todas, another people in India, Mr. Marshall states that their women

hold a position in the family quite unlike what is ordinarily witnessed among oriental nations. They are treated with respect and are permitted a remarkable amount of freedom.

The same is said of many of the aboriginal tribes of India. The Bheel husband has always had the credit of allowing his wife to domineer over him.

A Kol or Ho makes a regular companion of his wife. She is consulted in all difficulties, and receives the fullest consideration due to her sex.

Among the Indo-Chinese races equality of the sexes prevails, and prevailed long before Buddhism took any hold upon the country.

Mr. Crawford maintains that in the Malay Archipelago "the lot of women may be considered, on the whole, as more fortunate than in any other country of the East;" they associate with the men "in all respects on terms of such equality as surprise us in such a condition of society." The Dyak shows great respect for his wife, and generally asks her opinion; he regards her, "not as a slave, but as a companion." In Bali the women are on a perfect equality with the men. In Serang they have equal rights with the men in all communal matters, and are, consequently, treated well. In some parts of New Guinea the position of women is described as one of dignity:

They have a large voice in domestic affairs, and occasionally lord it over their masters. It is not only in domestic affairs, but also in the affairs of state, that their influence is felt.

In the Pelew Islands, according to Kubary, the women are in every respect the equals of the men; the eldest man, or *obokul*, of a family can do nothing without taking advice with its eldest female members. In the Kingsmill Islands very great consideration is shown women: they seem to have exclusive control over the house, and all the hard labor is performed by the men. In Tonga "women have considerable respect shown to them on account of their sex;" they are not subjected to hard labor or any grossly menial work, and their status in society is not inferior to that of men. In Samoa they

are held in much consideration . . . , treated with great attention, and not suffered to do any thing but what rightfully belongs to them.

Among the Line Islanders

no difference is made in the sexes; a woman can vote and speak as well as a man, and in general the women decide the question, unless it is one of war against another island.

Turning, finally, to the African continent, we find that among the negro races the woman, though often heavily burdened, and more or less subservient to her husband, is by no means without influence. Büttner observes:

When we become more closely acquainted with family conditions, we notice that there, as elsewhere, husbands are under petticoat government, and those most of all who like to pose before the outer world as masters of their house. The women, including the aunts, have on all occasions, important and unimportant alike, a weighty word to contribute.

The Monbuttu women, according to Dr. Schweinfurth, maintain the highest degree of independence with regard to their husbands:

The position in the household occupied by the men was illustrated by the reply which would be made if they were solicited to sell anything as a curiosity: "Ask my wife: it is hers."

Hahn writes of the Khoikoi (Hottentots):

In every Khoikoi's house the woman, or *taras*, is the supreme ruler; the husband has nothing at all to say. While in public the men take the prominent part, at home they have not even such power as to take a mouthful of sour milk out of the tub, without the wife's permission. Should a man try to exert supreme domestic control his nearest female relations will levy a fine from him, consisting of cows and sheep, which is to be added to the stock of the wife.

All these statements certainly do not imply that the husband has no recognized power over his wife, but they prove that his power is by no means unlimited. And to these facts—to which reference has just been made—numerous others concerning matrimonial matters might be added. Thus, among many savage peoples the husband has the right to divorce his wife only under certain conditions, while the wife is allowed to separate for some special cause, or simply at will. In certain parts of eastern central Africa divorce may be effected if the husband neglects to sew his wife's clothes. Among the Shans of Burma the woman has the right to turn adrift a husband who takes to drinking or otherwise misconducts himself, and to retain all the goods or any money of the partnership. Among the Savaras, an aboriginal hill people in the south of India, "a woman may leave her husband *whenever she pleases*." Surely, all this is very different from the absolute dominion which hasty generalizers have attributed to savage husbands in general.

It will perhaps be argued that savages live in polygamy, and that polygamy is degrading to the wife. But to this may be answered that many savages are strictly monogamous, and that

among the majority of them polygamy is an exception. Almost everywhere it is confined to the minority of the people, the vast majority being monogamous. Moreover, where there are many more women than men in a community—and this is not infrequently the case among uncivilized peoples, owing to war and other causes—it is questionable whether, under savage conditions of life, polygamy does not become a necessity. It is also worth noticing that among polygamous peoples the women themselves sometimes approve the custom. Livingstone tells us that some Makalolo women, on hearing that a man in England could marry but one wife, exclaimed that “they would not like to live in such a country; they could not imagine how English ladies could relish our custom, for, in their way of thinking, every man of position should have a number of wives, as a proof of his wealth.” In equatorial Africa also, according to Mr. Winwood Reade, the women are the stoutest supporters of polygamy: “If a man marries, and his wife thinks that he can afford another spouse, she pesters him to marry again, and calls him ‘a stingy fellow’ if he declines to do so.”

Again, it will be objected that most savages purchase their wives, and that this means that the woman is treated as a piece of property. But we must certainly not conclude, as some eminent sociologists have done, that where women are exchangeable for oxen or other beasts, they are “of course” regarded as equally without personal rights. The bride-price is a compensation for the loss sustained in the giving up of the girl, and a remuneration for the expenses incurred in her maintenance till the time of her marriage. It does not *eo ipso* confer on the husband absolute rights over her. There are peoples among which the husband’s authority is almost nil, although he has had to pay for his wife. Moreover, where the *bona fide* marriage by purchase prevails it is considered disgraceful for a woman to be given away for nothing. In Morocco it would certainly mean that the girl is considered good for nothing. When I told my Moorish friends that in Christian countries a man pays no money at all for his wife, but, on the contrary, often gets money with her, my friends apparently got

the idea that our estimation of the female sex is very low indeed, and that our men are very greedy.

To sum up: Among the uncivilized races the position of women varies. Among some it is undoubtedly very bad; among others it is extremely good; and, generally speaking, it is much better than it is commonly supposed to be. We now come to a very important problem, but one extremely difficult to solve: Why are women treated so differently in different societies?

It has been suggested that the social status of women is connected with the system of tracing descent. As is well known, among many of the lower races kinship is reckoned exclusively through the mother. This means that a person is considered a member of his mother's clan, not of his father's, and that property and rank succeed in the female line; for instance, that a man's nearest heir is not his own, but his sister's son. In a few exceptional cases the system of maternal descent even implies that a man's children are largely in the power of their maternal uncle. But this system does *not* imply that the mother is the head of the family; and, however it may have originated, no sociologist nowadays believes in Bachofen's theory that the system of tracing descent through the mother is a consequence of the supremacy of women. But Dr. Steinmetz, the well-known Dutch sociologist, has tried to show that the husband's authority over his wife is, broadly speaking, greater among those peoples which reckon kinship through the father than among those that reckon kinship through the mother only. The cases examined by Dr. Steinmetz, however, are too few to allow of any general conclusions, and the statements concerning the husband's rights are commonly so indefinite and so incomplete that I think the evidence would be difficult to produce, even if the investigation were based on a larger number of facts. When I compare with each other peoples of the same race, at the same stage of culture, living in the same neighborhood, under similar conditions of life, but differing from one another in their method of reckoning kinship, I do not find that the prevalence of the one or the other line of descent materially affects the husband's authority. Nothing of the kind is noticeable in Australia, nor, so far as I know, in India, where the

paternal system among many of the aboriginal tribes is combined with great or even extraordinary rights on the part of the wife. And among the west African negroes the position of women is, in all appearance, no less honorable in tribes like the Eboes, among whom inheritance runs through males, than in tribes which admit inheritance through females only.

According to another theory, the position of women and the degree of their dependence among a certain people are largely influenced by economic conditions. With referenec to the North American aborigines, for instance, the observation has been made that where the women can aid in procuring subsistence for the tribe they are treated with more equality, and their importance is proportioned to the share which they take in that labor; whereas in places where subsistence is chiefly procured by the exertions of the men the women are considered and treated as burdens. Thus, the position of women is exceptionally good in tribes that live upon fish and roots, which the women procure with a degree of expertness equal to that of the men, whereas it is among tribes that live by the chase, or by other means in which women can be of little service, that we find the sex most oppressed. Dr. Grosse, again, emphasizes the low status of women, not only among hunters, but among pastoral tribes. "The women," he says, "not being able to take part in war, possess nothing which could command respect with the rude shepherd and robber." Among agricultural peoples, on the other hand, Dr. Grosse adds, the position of the female is generally higher. The cultivation of the ground mostly devolves on the woman, and among peoples that chiefly subsist by agriculture it is not an occupation which is looked down upon, as it is among nomadic tribes. This gives the woman a certain standing, owing to her importance as a food-provider.

Now, in these generalizations there is no doubt a great deal of truth; but they do not hold good universally or without modification. Among several peoples that subsist chiefly by the chase or the rearing of cattle the position of women is exceedingly good. To mention only one instance out of many, Professor Vambery observes that among the nomadic Kara-Kirghiz the female sex is treated with greater respect than among those Turks who lead a

stationary life and practice agriculture. Indeed, the general theory that women are more oppressed in proportion as they are less useful is open to doubt. Commonly they are said to be oppressed by their savage husbands just by being compelled to work too hard; and that work does not necessarily give authority is obvious from the institution of slavery. But, at the same time, the notion, prevalent in early civilization, that the one sex must not in any way interfere with the pursuits of the other sex, may certainly, especially when applied to an occupation of such importance as agriculture, increase the influence of those who are engaged in it. Considering, further, that the cultivated soil is not infrequently regarded as the property of the women who till it, it is probable that, in certain cases at least, the agricultural habits of a people have had a favorable effect upon the general condition of the female sex.

It is often said that a people's civilization may be measured by the position held by its women. But at least so far as the earlier stages of culture are concerned, this opinion is not supported by facts. Among several of the lower races, including peoples like the Veddahs of Ceylon, the Andaman Islanders, and others of a very backward type, the females are treated with far greater consideration than among many of the higher savages or barbarians. Travelers have often noticed that of two neighboring tribes the less cultured one sets an example in this respect to the other. "Among the Bushmans," says Dr. Fritsch, "the women are life-companions; among the Kaffirs they are beasts of burden." Lewis and Clark even affirm that the status of women in a savage tribe has no necessary relation to its moral qualities in general:

The Indians whose treatment of the females is mildest, and who pay most deference to their opinions, are by no means the most distinguished for their virtues. . . . On the other hand, the tribes among whom the women are very much debased, possess the loftiest sense of honor, the greatest liberality, and all the good qualities of which their situation demands the exercise.

That the condition of women, or their relative independence, is no safe gauge of the general culture of a nation also appears from a comparison between many of the lower races and peoples of a higher civilization, like the Chinese, Hindus, Hebrews, and civi-

lized Mohammedan nations. Among these peoples the married women are, or have been, much more subjected to their husbands than they are among many, if not most, of the uncivilized races. The great religions of the world have had a tendency to treat women as inferior beings. They attach much importance to ceremonial cleanliness; nothing unclean must approach the deity. And women are regarded as unclean.

It is pleasant to note that, even where the position of the female sex from a legal, religious, and social point is disgracefully low, the women, in spite of their physical weakness, are not quite unable to influence the men, and even to make their husbands tremble. They have in their hands a weapon, which is invisible to the superficial observer, but which is powerful enough to give them a secret authority which may be very considerable. They have their curses, and they have their profound knowledge of magic. Being commonly invested with a certain mystery, they are supposed to have the command of mysterious, magic powers. It is said in the Laws of Manu, the mythical legislator of the Hindus, that a man ought to be kind to the women of his house, because otherwise they may burn the whole house with their fury, that is, with their curses. And during my stay among the country people of Morocco, Arabs and Berbers alike, I was often struck by the fear which the women inspired in the men. A woman is looked upon by them as quite a dangerous being. First, a man may be sure that, if he maltreats his wife, she will have the support of the other women of the village, whereas he himself will not be equally supported by the other men. But the chief danger is of a supernatural kind. For instance, the wife only needs to cut a little piece of donkey's ear and put in into the husband's food. What happens? By eating the little piece the husband will, in his relations to his wife, become just like a donkey; he will always listen to what she says, and the wife will become the ruler of the house. It is better, therefore, to treat her with kindness than to provoke her anger. In Mohammedan countries married women also derive much influence from the children's affection for their mother. We must not look upon the oriental woman only as a wife; we must also take into account her posi-

tion as a mother. The Berbers of the Atlas have a saying—attributed to their great sage, Sidi Hammu—which indicates the feelings of the men both toward women in general and toward their mothers. Sidi Hammu said: “Oh you women, you seed of the oleander tree, I should like to burn all of you, if my mother were not one of you.”

As I said in the beginning of my paper, I could offer only a fragment. I have emphasized a few points which, I think, have often been more or less overlooked. But I have also been anxious to point out how little we know at present about the real causes on which the position of women in the various human societies depends. I dare say that some twenty years hence we shall know much more. Those who are interested in sociology should well understand that sociology is still in the making. But if kindly taken care of, it will no doubt grow rapidly. Hence all sociologists must hail with extreme gratification the foundation of the society which is now having its first meeting. As a foreigner, I think I may be allowed on this occasion to pay to its founders the tribute of continental esteem, and express the conviction, widely shared, that the new tree could not possibly have been planted in better soil.

EDWARD WESTERMARCK.

HELSINGFORS.