

## THE CONDITIONS OF EGALITARIAN MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS IN FORAGING SOCIETIES

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In their book, *Women, culture and society*, Rosaldo and Lamphere categorically state that

all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated, and although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of life (1974:3).

Recent writings on several hunter-gatherer societies — the !Kung (Draper 1975; Lee 1979; Marshall 1976), Mbuti (Turnbull 1965), Agta (Griffin and Griffin n.d.), Hadza (Woodburn 1978, 1980), Paliyan (Gardner 1966) and Malapantaram (Morris 1978) — do, however, report the existence of sexual egalitarianism. This equality is, in fact, treated as a socio-cultural datum that hardly needs justification. For example, Turnbull writes of the Mbuti: "A woman is in no way the social inferior of a man, and there is little absolute division of labour along sex lines" (1965:271). Lee states: "The !Kung are a fiercely egalitarian people" (1979:244). Draper reports: "Most members of the Harvard !Kung Bushman Study Project who have thought about the subject of !Kung women's status agree that !Kung society may be the least sexist of any we have experienced" (1975: 77). It appears that people who have actually lived with hunter-gatherers and have actively looked for male bias within the society find it far easier to accept that there can be societies where sexual egalitarianism can exist than do those students of societies where men are clearly dominant.

Before proceeding further, I would like to define the terms dominance, equality and egalitarianism. By dominance I mean control over others' labour, decision-making, social contacts, access to food and resources and sexuality. I do not include under dominance the protective and defensive roles that men may take when group defence is necessary. Defence of females and children is not the same as dominance over them. I use the two terms equality and egalitarianism interchangeably to refer to individual control of one's own labour, decision-making, course of action, social contacts and sexuality; and to all individuals coming under the same cultural evaluations. I do not distinguish whether the societies actually talk about equality or simply live in an egalitarian way. Most important, my use of the words equality and egalitarianism do not suggest or presuppose that

all activities of men and women must be identical. There can be many differences in what men and women do in an egalitarian society. What makes it egalitarian is how the activities are controlled and culturally evaluated. I also do not mean that in egalitarian societies physical differences are or must be ignored or denied. These definitions, incidentally, have been distilled from my research, not made before it.

There are, of course, several foraging societies where the relationship between the sexes is far from being egalitarian. Many, if not all, Australian Aboriginal, Eskimo, and North American Indian societies could not on the whole be considered egalitarian. Elsie Begler in her article "Sex, status, and authority in egalitarian society" (1978) suggests that there may be a continuum of subtypes of egalitarian societies ranging from pure egalitarianism to semi-egalitarianism. James Woodburn has suggested a more definitive classification of foraging societies which, as a byproduct if not a direct aim, distinguishes those foraging societies with sexual egalitarianism from those without it. Woodburn divides all foraging societies into those which have a delayed return on labour and those which have an immediate return on labour. The type of organization of labour needed for each of these categories radically differs. In delayed-return societies substantial investment is made in technology and there is an unavoidable delay between productive labour and resultant yield. This describes pastoralists as well as part-time hunters, sedentary hunters, foragers dependent on fishing, trappers, bee-keepers and mounted hunters. In these societies we do not find sexual equality. What we do find is a more rigid division of labour and social organization than in immediate-return societies.

Woodburn's category of immediate-return systems minimally includes the !Kung Bushmen, Mbuti, Hadza, Malapantaram, Paliyan, and Batek Negritos. He writes:

All these societies are nomadic and positively value movement. They do not accumulate property but consume it, give it away, gamble it away, or throw it away. Most of them have knowledge of techniques for storing food but use them only occasionally to prevent food from going rotten rather than to save it for some future occasion. They tend to use portable, utilitarian, easily acquired, replaceable artifacts — made with real skill but without hours of labour — and avoid those which are fixed in one place, heavy, elaborately decorated, require prolonged manufacture, regular maintenance, joint work by several people or any combination of these. The system is one in which people travel light, unencumbered, as they see it, by possessions and by commitments (1980:99).

Woodburn also adds that in immediate-return societies individuals do not hold exclusive rights over territory and resources, each person has direct access to food, water and the raw materials needed for tools, and there is obligatory sharing of meat. Further features of these societies are that people are potentially autonomous, there are no authority figures, and decision-making in marriage is equally shared between husband and wife (Woodburn 1978: 12-23).

The important question arising from Woodburn's description of immediate return societies is: what is the basic factor that connects the features of immediate-return societies to the male-female equality that has been reported for them? Begler gives us a valuable lead. She writes: "egalitarian societies may well be characterized by the absence of sociocentric statuses of authority" (1978:575). This means that where there are no institutionalized authority roles the only influence one person can have over another is that derived from personal qualities. Because there are personally persuasive women as well as men, women can have influence over others in such a system.

The absence of sociocentric statuses of authority in an immediate-return society can be illustrated by the Batek. The Batek have only two important levels of social organization: the nuclear family and the camp. The nuclear family is formed by marriage. Marriages are willingly entered into by each partner, the choice of spouse being up to the individuals involved. While parents may suggest marriage partners for their children, marriages are not arranged by anyone other than the prospective spouses. In marriage all economic and other decisions are made jointly by the husband and wife. Of course, in different marriages one may find either the wife or the husband to be the more vocal, opinionated partner. This in no way lessens the co-operative nature of the family. At any time, if either partner finds the marriage incompatible or burdensome, he or she can initiate a divorce simply by leaving and going elsewhere to live. A further indication of the absence of authority statuses in the family unit is that neither parent can be said to have authority over their children. In fact, in situations where parental authority would be an advantage, as when children must be stopped from a dangerous activity, parents must resort to frightening their children by telling them a tiger or a stranger will get them if they continue their misbehaviour, or that they are breaking a religious prohibition, punishable by superhuman beings.

The Batek camp is merely a cluster of autonomous nuclear families who come together temporarily, usually because of common interests. The only extra-familial influential figure is what may be called the 'de facto leader'. These natural leaders are merely persons who can influence others because of their wisdom, experience, good sense, charisma and persuasiveness. In some camps there are no such individuals. De facto leaders can be either men or women. The leader of our group was a woman. De facto leadership is in no way an institutionalized position: it cannot be inherited or perpetuated apart from the individual.

Turnbull writes that, for the Mbuti,

each field of activity has its own leaders, drawn from a particular segment of the community. It is in this way that authority is dispersed throughout the band; every adult is accorded special respect in one field or another, but none can claim respect in all fields. Individual authority is unthinkable (1965:181).

The same is certainly true of the Batek. Thus, for example, good hunters are sought out for advice on hunting matters while a man or woman who knows a particular spell is sought out when people are in need of it. Individual competence is respected, yet the acknowledgement of it in no way gives a person authority over others.

It seems clear that in societies where there are no institutionalized positions of authority people interact as individuals. Men and women are equally able to voice their opinions and exercise or resist influence as they see fit. This is not to deny that men in immediate-return societies are generally physically stronger than women and perhaps also inherently more aggressive. It is just that in such societies these differences do not make much difference. In all these societies aggression and violence are abhorred (see, for example, Marshall 1976:288). This protects the weak, whether male or female, from brute coercion by the strong. Any person who was habitually aggressive toward others would be rejected by the group. In immediate-return societies, each person, regardless of strength, aggression, or assertiveness, can act directly on the environment to get food. Food production does not depend on controlling other people. It is in more complex societies that the differences between the sexes are elaborated and exaggerated. Where there are institutionalized statuses of authority, men can use the threat of physical coercion to pave the way to exclusive male access to these positions. It is where these positions are not institutionalized that being male does not provide an advantage over being female.

Some writers argue that hunting, seen as a predominantly male activity, inevitably leads to higher status for men, implying that even in hunting and gathering societies sexual asymmetry is inescapable. Friedl puts forward the following statement.

No matter what proportion of the diet it may represent, meat is always the favored food. It is the food believed to taste best, to be the most satisfying. The giving of meat from big game animals always confers prestige on the givers. This situation has important consequences for sex roles among hunters and gatherers (1975:13)

She adds:

First...meat as a scarce resource is valued above all others, second the hunter of meat is correspondingly valued, and third, honor and prestige are accorded the generous giver (1975:22).

Friedl's points are neat, but logic and the ethnographic data of Marshall, Lee, Turnbull, the Griffins (at work now among Agta Negritos in the Philippines), and Kirk Endicott and myself do not support her views.

A minor point is that meat is not always the favoured food. Turnbull reports that honey is the most favoured food of the Mbuti. He writes: "No amount of alternative foods, even meat, can reduce this passion for honey" (1965:170). The honey season is a very festive time, with magic, games, singing and dancing. For the Batek, fruit holds a similar position. The fruit season finds the Batek eating fruit to the exclusion of most other foods, including meat. It is a season looked forward to for its ease and for the all-night singing and dancing sessions that celebrate the fruit and the role that superhuman beings play in giving fruit to the Batek.

Friedl derives her notion that hunters are highly valued from the idea that producers of scarce goods — in this case meat — will be valued. Yet she says that it is from the distribution of big game in particular that hunters gain their prestige. If meat is so scarce, why then is not the meat from small game also 'valued' so highly? Meat is meat, or is it? In order to answer this and determine its connection with sex roles, we must consider a few different lines of reasoning.

It is true that in most of the hunting and gathering societies men do most if not all of the hunting of larger animals. The Mbuti net-hunters are an exception; women always help. The Griffins report (n.d.) that among the Agta Negritos of the Philippines women can and do hunt, even frequently, with bows and arrows. The Griffins have questioned whether anthropologists have overlooked female hunting by simply not considering it hunting. When

women procure animals, whatever size, it is usually referred to as gathering — Friedl certainly does so (1975:12). The Griffins note that Richard Gould saw women in Western Australia hunting kangaroos. Among the !Kung, hunting is said to be men's work; women are prohibited from hunting and having contact with hunting equipment. In Batek society women are not prohibited from hunting, but few bother to do it beyond playing at it during childhood. Batek women do procure (is this hunting, gathering, digging?) bamboo rats, a good source of meat. Batek men, however, have a clear statistical dominance in hunting. They procure 95 per cent by weight of all animal foods, while women produce only 5 per cent. Lee writes that !Kung women

basically leave hunting to the men. I did not get the feeling that women's nonparticipation in hunting was a sore issue between the sexes (i.e. that the women wanted to hunt but the men would not let them, or that the men wanted women to share in the work of hunting but the latter did not want to). It was not an area of conflict. Much more in evidence was the women's complaints that the men did not bring in enough meat. Good-natured (and not so good-natured) accusations of men's laziness at hunting were a common refrain in many camps (1979: 235).

The significant thing about big game as opposed to small game, no matter who procures it, is that it can feed a lot of people. Thus a big game kill always leads to a large-scale distribution. Small amounts of game are in many societies considered only enough to feed the hunter (or gatherer) and perhaps the immediate nuclear family. Among the Batek this is true even of gathered foods. Larger amounts of tubers, for example, are distributed more widely than smaller amounts, and more gets distributed per family. The excitement, interest and talk about game, especially larger game in some hunting societies, like the !Kung, seem to be a way of getting people to keep trying to get large game. Large game hunting is relatively more dangerous, takes longer and, as Lee points out, is less sure of success than is gathering. In certain environments game may not be as abundant or as easy to get as in others. For example, Batek hunting concentrated on getting monkeys, which are fairly evenly distributed throughout the rain forest. The success rate of their hunting is 59 per cent — one in every two hunts succeeds. In the desert area of the !Kung where game is larger (for example antelope), more scattered, and harder to find and track once the animal is wounded, the success rate for hunting is only 25 per cent (Lee 1968: 40). Andrade has suggested that

the men under the greatest pressure [to hunt] are those who live in immediate-return societies where women do not join in hunting to secure predictable returns of meat, where the hunting of large game animals is the only way to supply large quantities of meat (1978:3).

The !Kung seem to take measures to actively encourage hunting, more so than do the Mbuti, Hadza and Batek. Before a !Kung man can marry he must prove his hunting prowess by killing a large antelope; he then undergoes the Rite of the First Kill. During this he is scarified. The scars serve as a constant reminder to him not just to sit around the campfire lazily but to continue to actively hunt. Although hunting is expected of men in the other foraging societies, marriage is not held as a social reward for competent hunting, as happens in !Kung society. The !Kung also place a greater emphasis on hunting magic than do the other societies. The !Kung seem to be actively encouraging or pressuring their men to hunt. It seems to work too. Meat accounts for 25 per cent of the !Kung diet. The Batek have enough meat (0.43 lb or 195 g) per person per day to allow them to divert much of their time from hunting to gathering rattan for trade, yet meat still only comprises 15 per cent of their total diet.

Although men are expected to hunt in the immediate-return societies and in some, such as the !Kung, hunting success is specially rewarded, do these societies really accord honour and prestige to hunters, as Friedl insists? Turnbull notes that in Mbuti society

A man who displays himself as a great hunter and boasts of his achievements too loudly is somewhat distrusted, and any attempt on his part to use his reputation to gain more say than others will lead to immediate ridicule (1965:179).

Lee writes of the !Kung:

After a run of successful hunts during which he has been the host of several meat distributions the hunter may stop hunting in order to give other men the chance to take the limelight. Marshall makes the point, and I am inclined to concur, that a too energetic hunter or gatherer might be appreciated up to a point, but then would begin to draw the envy and resentment of others (1979:249).

Do the best hunters dominate the politics of the camp and monopolize the women? Far from it. The !Kung are a fiercely egalitarian people, and they have evolved a series of important cultural practices to maintain this equality, first by cutting down the size of the arrogant and boastful, and second by helping those down on their luck to get back into the game (1979:244).

Hunting success is further prevented from producing social stratification by stringent distribution rules. The sharing of meat and, in some societies, like the Batek, the sharing of vegetable foods, is culturally prescribed. Friedl's idea that generosity gives rise to prestige just does not follow from obligatory distribution. Hunters cannot withhold or vary the proportions of meat given out. The !Kung further disperse the connection between hunting and distributing meat by maintaining that it is the owner of the arrow that killed the animal who owns and distributes the meat. As there is much lending and borrowing of arrows, the hunter may not actually be the owner of the arrow or of the animal he has killed. The owner of the arrow may even be a woman. Marshall writes that the !Kung "seem to want to extinguish in every way possible the concept of the meat belonging to the hunter" (1976:297). Thus, while hunting is in most immediate-return societies a predominantly male activity, meat distribution is not an exclusive male domain.

It is clear that Friedl's argument is back to front: the value of food does not in fact confer value on persons. The dominant role of men in producing meat does not of itself place men in a dominant position in general in any of the immediate-return societies. It takes more than a few pounds, or a few hundred pounds, of meat to accomplish such a cultural task. The fact that men and women in immediate-return societies may perform different foraging activities in no way leads to an unequal structuring of male-female relationships or differential evaluations of the activities of each sex. Asymmetrical structuring of society depends upon the legitimization of authority structures in that society. Isobel White points out "it is an almost universal trait to consider one's own job important" (1974:39). It takes a person (or persons) in authority to insist that the job or role of another person or of an entire sex group is not important. In immediate-return societies there is a conspicuous absence of authority positions. Thus we find that men and women are not differentially valued. In contrast there are authority positions in those foraging societies that require a more complex social organization either for production (these are Woodburn's delayed-return societies) or, as in the case of Australian Aboriginal societies, for ritual purposes. When a society has authority positions to be filled, male dominance seems to be the usual, if not universal, consequence, if for no other reason than that men may preclude female opposition by sheer brute force. Immediate-return foraging societies appear to be the only type of society in which male dominance cannot get a foothold. The



immediate-return foraging societies have shown that male-female egalitarianism can and does exist but is tied to a level of social organization that occurs today in only a handful of societies.

#### Note

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