ANDAMANESE SEX ROLES

Differentiation in male and female roles has frequently contributed to the demonstration of the inferior status of women, or of their consignment to the low-prestige family role of child-rearing. We should like to discuss here sex roles among the Andamanese, which present a situation different from that of other hunting and gathering societies in India and South-East Asia and may be related to the historical isolation of their islands. Our analysis is based primarily on the data of E.H.Man (1883) and Radcliffe-Brown (1933), the two principal field-workers among the Andamanese. They did not make any special analysis of women's roles, but offered only general remarks on male-female relations and what Man called 'their marked equality, affection, and self-respect'. They both note a clear-cut sexual division of labour as found among other hunters and gatherers, and a generalized female involvement in ritual and political activities.

Economic Activities

Precise information is lacking as far as the economic role of women is concerned. According to Murdock (1968), hunting contributes 20% of the diet, fishing 30% and gathering 50%. Men and women, according to these figures, contribute equally to the subsistence of the group. The dietary study carried out by Bose for the Onge of Little Andaman during January 1964 (Bose 1964) also deserves mention. Meehan (1977) presents her data in terms of weight: pig and turtle represent 472 kg. and 24 kg. of edible flesh respectively; gathering products account for 259 kg., shellfish for 3 kg. and fish for 179 kg. Although she does not mention it, the fishing was probably done mainly by women as, according to Bose's chart,

pig hunting - a male occupation - was carried out almost daily. This study thus confirms the approximately equal contribution of men and women in obtaining food.

As in all hunting and gathering societies, men are the sole hunters of the group. We may note, however, that hunting depends on the season; it is especially important from May to August, but almost non-existent from March to May (during the north-east monsoon), during which period the men help the women in collecting tubers. Ethnographic accounts report the sharing of game between men and women within the group; after a successful hunt, pigs are cut up and partly cooked, and lumps of meat are then divided among all the families present, who finish the preparation alone. We have no way of knowing the extent of this sharing or the amounts of meat consumed by the women subsequently. However, all authors report the existence of large feasts after a hunt, where meat is divided up and eaten in large quantities by the whole group, and where dancing follows. These huge meals are then followed for several days by a diet of fruit and vegetables. This would imply that, whatever kind of food is available, is shared by the whole group, at least at the evening meals.

In the case of fishing, the men go out into the open sea in canoes in search of dugong, turtle and the larger fish, and also catch small fish inshore with their bows and arrows. Women fish collectively on the coast, using small hand-nets or even their bare hands, mostly catching lobsters, crabs, shellfish and turtles grounded on the beach. Large-scale collective fishing by all members of the community, irrespective of sex or of age (except for the very young and the very old), also occurs when the opportunity arises. The whole shoal may then be netted. As for the sharing of fish, Sarkar (1974) mentions that among the Onge of Little Andaman women divide their catch among their respective families, while the catches of individual men are retained by them. On the other hand, the catches of organised collective fishing by both men and women are distributed equally by all the families of the local group. Sarkar writes that 'both males and females play their assigned roles and none of their roles is less important in relation to one another as one supplements the other....' When men are unlucky in sea fishing, women provide their coastal catches. According to Sarkar, the women's contribution to fishing is considered significant, and they enjoy a certain prestige and position. Thus it seems that all able-bodied adults procure and profit from food without discrimination. Each sex specializes in a certain kind of labour and shares resources according to availability.

Man and Radcliffe Brown both mention exchange transactions of meat and fish between coast-dwellers and jungle-dwellers; wax, clay artefacts and decorated bones, all manufactured by women, are exchanged also. Women are excluded from any decisions concerning hunting and sea-fishing, while on the other hand it may well be that men are excluded from any decisions concerning gathering.

Manufacturing Techniques

Men and women also have assigned and clearly defined roles for manufacturing hunting equipment and other implements. Generally, men manufacture all their hunting and fishing equipment (canoes, weapons, cords, lines and turtle nets), while women make their own fishing-nets, slings, sleeping-mats, basket-work, screens and torches, and prepare cords for bags, necklaces, arrow fastenings, bracelets, etc. Both sexes use a cyrena shell to make cords and lines. Another common implement is the stone hammer, which men use for flattening arrow-heads and women for making bone necklaces. Both sexes are equally involved in making pottery.

Women are also in charge of preparing the various clay washes and waxes needed for ritual purposes, mainly *tala-og* (white clay mixed with water), *koi-ob* (a mixture of oxide of iron with turtle- or pig-fat) and *kangata-buj* (red wax). This last item is also manufactured by men for use in protecting the string fastenings of arrows, spears and harpoons. These washes are prepared by women for the body decorations used during ceremonies, and they also make many other objects, such as necklaces, trays, paddles, bows, etc. As far as house-building is concerned, permanent encampments and temporary homes for periods of a few months (as for example in a period of mourning) are erected by men, while shelters for short visits and temporary rests are built by women.

Political Activities

Elderly persons of both sexes take communal decisions, and hold similar positions within the tribe. Radcliffe-Brown relates that women seem to have a good deal of influence over any decisions concerning the encampment, and over quarrels between individuals and local groups. Man states that the headmen are male, and that they act merely as influential guides for organising hunting expeditions and local group meetings. Both the headman and his wife enjoy respect, and the wife rules over all the unmarried women of the camp; even when she becomes a widow, her respectable and influential position stays the same. In North Andaman, for instance, feuds between neighbouring local groups were quite frequent. At the end of a feud there would be a special peace-making ceremony, which Radcliffe-Brown describes as follows:

> One or two of the women of the one group would be sent to interview the women of the other group to see if they were willing to forget the past and make friends. It seems that *it was largely the rancour of the women over their slain relatives* that kept the feud alive, the men of the two parties being willing to make friends much more readily than the women (1933; our emphasis).

His experience suggests that women, although sent by the men to negotiate peace, were not merely mediators, but had real decision-

making power and exerted a strong influence on the men as to when the fighting should cease; it was they, in fact, who counted bodies and demanded vengeance.

Ritual Activities

Women are never excluded from any of the rituals described by Man and Radcliffe-Brown. Certain roles assumed by them in these ceremonies suggest that they are as important as men to them, and they participate fully in the symbolic activities. Women play an especially important role in two of these activities - scarification and body decoration.

1. Scarification

Young girls and boys are submitted to scarification from their early childhood. The operation is repeated at intervals during childhood until the whole body is scarified. Women make the incisions with a small flake of quartz and are the main practitioners. The sole exception is the scarifying performed on the backs of young boys during their initiation ceremonies by an elder man using a pig arrow; these are connected especially with hunting.

2. Clay decoration and patterns

These decorations are used during the extremely elaborate ceremonies which occur at intervals during the life-cycle. These ceremonies include initiation at puberty for both boys and girls; marriage; the end of mourning; communal peace-making; and special occasions where paintings and dancing are required, such as meetings of different local groups, the death of a relative, before burial, after successful hunts followed by big feasts, and during illness. The initiation ceremonies are among the most elaborate and comprise several steps, among which the most prominent are the turtle-eating ceremony (mainlyfor coast-dwellers), the pig-eating ceremony, and the honey-eating ceremony. These relate to food prohibitions that start with the initiation period (for children of around eight years of age), corresponding with the onset of a period of fasting. Young girls and boys have to observe certain restrictions, which are re-stated at each new ceremony. For example, the turtle ceremony enables them to eat turtle - previously forbidden - but other foods remain prohibited. In connection with each of these there is a minor ceremony, so that one after the other, all food prohibitions are removed until the man or woman becomes free to eat anything (this being at marriage for a man, and at the time of first pregnancy for a woman).

During and after each of these ceremonies, clay patterns and decorations are made on the bodies of both men and women. Two forms of decoration can be distinguished:

a) A smear of common clay is used for initiates, warriors, homicides, and sick people, and also for participants in the orgiastic meals that follow a successful hunt, due to the fear that animal

smells may attract evil spirits. These periods correspond to danger. People are called *kimil*, which refers to a state of danger, and they are covered with this ordinary clay which alleviates the 'smell' of the *kimil* and keeps evil spirits away. This clay does not require special patterns and is generally applied by each man and woman on his or her own body.

b) Elaborate patterns made of fine white clay and red ochre are used for the decoration of men's and women's bodies before the final phase of these ceremonies, which consist of dancing and singing. These patterns correspond to the end of a ritually taboo condition; initiates, mourners, etc., formerly in a *kimil* condition, are removed from danger. As Leach (1965) points out, this decoration serves as an agent of transformation ending the *kimil* condition, which is, for him, an ambiguous state, in view of the application of ordinary clay. These decorations are made only by women.

These same patterns are found again when, at the end of the mourning period, the bones of the deceased relatives are dug up, ornamented and painted, and used as cures for sickness or as presents to relatives or members of other local groups. Once again, women have the monopoly of this symbolic representation.

Thus it seems that women are not only included in the ritual human cycle but are directly concerned in more everyday activities. Since we know little about Andamanese values, our purpose is not so much to prove that the Andamanese situation reflects one of male-female equality, but to show that, as far as we can tell from the available evidence, women create links of cooperation between persons, families and even local groups. By their specific economic, ritual and political functions, they contribute largely, and are indeed essential to the economic and social life of the group.

Many essays have been written on sex roles, and particularly on universal male domination. We will not take up this discussion here, except to stress two points. First, as Briggs has noted (1974), concepts such as domination, and equality and inequality, should be avoided until valid criteria are established. Are they to refer to a range of specialised knowledge, to control over the means of production or reproduction, or to personal domination? Among the Andamanese, both male and female roles are essential to the whole group and mutually supportive, even where differentiated. Every member of the group controls food production and the manufacture of goods, and every member is equally responsible for ritual cooperation and peace. Differentiation does not give way, in the Andamanese society, to demonstrations of superiority or prestige, at least not explicitly.

Secondly, public and family spheres are often said to be universal opposites, with women confined to child-rearing, and men taking care of political affairs and extra-communal problems. We have just seen, however, that among elders, decision-making about production, distribution, settlements, disputes, ritual feasts, wars, etc., is often collective. Men individually make decisions about the activities for which they are responsible, as do women.

At the ritual, political and ideological levels women, by virtue of the fact that they transcend mere mediation between men, participate in public life; and apparently this cooperation does not seem to lead to any conflicts between the sexes. The place of women in Andamanese society thus reflects the relations of egalitarianism, cooperation and solidarity that hunting and gathering societies require. Avoidance of conflicts, recognition of individual prestige on the basis of knowledge rather than power, and the sharing principle are values recognized by all, and necessary to the continuity of the society.

Leacock, in a recent article (1978), has attempted to place women's status in a historical perspective, and has argued that the tendency to attribute to pre-class societies concepts such as equality, power and property - all characteristic of class societies - becomes equivocal where such concepts are applied to band societies, where decisions are taken by all members of the group, and where there is no dichotomy between public and private spheres. She has also pointed out that women's control generally declines with the advent of trade. In the light of this, we shall now examine the extent to which sex roles among the Andamanese may be a consequence of their historical isolation.

The position of the Andamanese female seems rather different from that of all other hunting and gathering societies in South and South-east Asia. Although among the Birhor, Paliyans, Veddas, Negritos, Aetas, etc., men do not seem to exercise control over women's labour and reproduction, and there is no rigorous separation of men and women; nowhere is there to be found such a specific inclusion of women in political as well as ritual life as among the Andamanese.

Among the Birhor of Chota Nagpur (India) ceremonial knowledge is a male preserve, scarification being done only on male children, and by male elders (Williams 1974). Roy earlier (1925) mentioned that all Birhor exclude females (except for girls who have not yet reached the age of puberty) from their spirit-huts. Women are not allowed to eat the heads of animals captured in the hunt or sacrificed to the spirits; ordinarily men alone are entitled to offer sacrifices to the spirits and only they have personal relations with them. There is one exception, however, where a woman may have to offer sacrifices to her own *manita* spirits, which are transmitted through the female line. Only in this case may she eat the head of a sacrificed animal, which she shares with her husband, although it is her husband who actually performs the sacrifice.

Concerning the Paliyans of south India Gardner (1972) reports a sexual egalitarianism, members of both sexes being in contact with individual supernatural beings. He also reports the exchange of clothes between men and women during dances, which he describes as an expression of sexual complementarity. However, he describes what is a situation of minimal economic cooperation between the sexes, in which a husband and wife will sometimes feed only themselves for several months.

Among the Veddas, the Seligmans reported (1911) that most ceremonies and invocations were connected with hunting, and that men were the officiants at them; women did rock paintings, but these do not seem to have been connected with a precise ritual activity. Anthropologists working with many Indian groups have commented on the strict seclusion of women during polluting periods such as childbirth and menses. A parturient Birhor woman has a new doorway made to her confinement room, and for a certain number of days after delivery, during which contact with her is generally taboo, she must use only this entrance door. Food prohibitions are quite important during pregnancy and remain so after delivery, but they apply only to women. This is rather in contrast to the Andamanese, where husbands attend their wives when they are giving birth, and share the same food prohibitions.

Evans reports (1937) that face paintings, scarification and nose-piercing are common among the Negritos of Malaysia. He states that both sexes ornament themselves, but unfortunately gives no further details here. Shamans are all male, and designs on combs (worn during dances by women), on birth bamboos (worn by women during pregnancy) and on blowpipes (engraved to be sure that the game will be not only struck but killed) are engraved only by men. Schebesta, in a note concerning the Semang of Patalung, Thailand (1925), mentions that the head of the tribe was a woman, but his information is unreliable as he never saw the camp, but only met a few men in a neighbouring village. Among the Penan, and among similar groups in the Philippines, no precise data is available on female and male social roles, but only on the traditional sexual division of labour. In general, ethnographic accounts note relative equality between men and women in these societies, yet female control of production seems to be exercised in the interests of individuals rather than the collectivity, and there is no evidence for cooperation between the sexes with regard to any social level.

On the whole, differences between the Andaman Islands and similar groups in South and South-east Asia are great. The Andamanese are characterized by elaborate and complex rituals and mythology, by corporate entities, by elaborate technology (S-shaped bows, pottery, outrigger canoes), and by cooperation and solidarity at all levels in the male-female relationships we have just described. What is most striking is that the Andamanese, perhaps due to their isolation, had no trading relationships - not even silent barter - with outsiders prior to annexation, as far as we know. This isolation may be a reason for these differences; trade may have the effect of undermining cooperation between the sexes. And it is significant that hunting and gathering societies in India, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines have been trading with agriculturalists for a long time. Tamil literature of the first seven centuries AD describes tribal cultures with precision - both swiddening and hunting and gathering types - and also gives evidence for trade in forest products. In 1681, Robert Knox reported the Veddas trading with the Sinhalese kingdom, exchanging forest products for iron and arrow-points (cited

in Seligman and Seligman 1911). Needham (1954) reports that the nomadic Penan of the interior of northwestern Borneo conclude blood-pacts with the long-house groups of the settled Kayan. By these pacts the Penan secure immunity from attack, while the Kayan are able to procure forest products from the Penan. Silent trade is reported from the first century between on the one hand, the Negritos of the Malay Peninsula and the Aetas of the Philippines, and on the other, Chinese, Arab and Malay traders. The Semang traded wax, resin, gum and other products for salt, beads, cloth, metal articles and weapons. Archaeological work in the Philippines (Hutterer 1974) has revealed the antiquity of trade between the nomadic tribes of the interior and the Chinese. This trade seems to have shifted over time to a symbiotic exchange of the produce of agricultural populations, especially iron, for forest products.

There is no doubt that the loosely organised groups composed of independent nuclear families is a recent phenomenon, a consequence of the dependence of hunting and gathering societies on the capitalist economy, and in some cases, of their involvement in sporadic agriculture; but it is certain that barter and a relative degree of specialisation have preceded the development of modern capitalism. In Carreon's translation of a Spanish manuscript - itself transcribed from the original Visayan of around AD 1200 - we learn that the Negritos of the Panay Islands traded various forest products and engaged in both agriculture and hunting and gathering (Carreon 1957).

It appears, therefore, that the interaction between hunting and agricultural populations is of great antiquity, introducing an element of specialization among the hunters, and making them to a certain extent dependent on agriculturalists. As Leacock points out (1978), processes concerning specialization and exchange may contribute to the delineation of a public domain in which men become more important economically and politically, their activities being seen as more prestigious, while there is a parallel and general decline in female control. In other words, although the advent of trade does not really seem to undermine the egalitarian ideal of hunting and gathering societies, it may in some way undermine cooperative relations between the sexes. As for the Andaman Islanders, exchanges between coast-dwellers and jungle-dwellers, mostly of fish, meat, washes of clay and ornamented articles, did exist, but these never seem to have extended beyond the islands. Iron was not originally used for tools or arrows, though in more recent centuries some came to be obtained from shipwrecks. Thus many hunting and gathering societies in India and South-east Asia would seem to have developed symbiotic relations with agriculturalists, who have affected the formers' social organisation through their contact, while others, like the Andamanese, have retreated instead into hostile isolation. It is these two responses - cultural transformation and isolation - that have variously arisen from such contacts in these areas.

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