

Cross-cultural traditions and mating practices described in classical anthropological research

In their landmark anthropological research, Ford and Beach have stated that “the members of no one society can safely be regarded as representative of the human race as a whole” (1951). While this is highly evident in the data yielded from many cross-cultural traditions and mating practices of preliterate societies, Symons (1979) has proposed the existence of several universal factors that underlie mating practices among humans, regardless of cultural constructs. These factors, rooted in evolutionary sexual selection, are regarded by Symons as templates for adaptations that are expressed with apparent variety in preliterate environments. He described these universals as follows: Intrasexual competition is more intense among males than among females, and in these societies competition over women has been the single most important cause of violence. Men are inclined to polygyny, whereas women seem equally satisfied in polygynous, monogamous or, rarely, polyandrous relationships. Almost universally, men display sexual jealousy toward their mates; this is not always the case for women, although the intensity of feeling within sexual jealousy may certainly be equal in both sexes. Physical characteristics, particularly those that correlate with youth, are principally the most important factors of women’s sexual attractiveness. To females, male sexual attractiveness is much less important, whereas economic and political power hold greater importance. The primary sexual significance of marriage among most civilizations is that spouses obtain sexual rights over each other; thus, marriage is not necessarily founded on sexuality, and sexual attractiveness is rarely an important consideration over industry, ability and general temperament. Males in much greater preponderance than females are

predisposed to desire multiple sex partners for variety. Among the various cultural populations studied to date, copulation is considered a favor that women grant to men and not vice versa, regardless of which sex appears to derive greater physical and mental pleasure from coitus.

Support for Symons’ theories on marriage as a union based on factors other than sexual compatibility can be found in extensive research conducted by Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands, an archipelago in Melanesia (1929). Trobriand boys and girls engage in sexual activity without adult restrictions; according to Malinowski, girls begin copulating between the ages of six and eight and boys between the ages of ten and twelve. Sexual liaisons become more frequent and more intense and personal preferences in short-term mate selection are permitted. Despite these sexual freedoms, marriage still occupies a central position in Trobriand culture. A man does not obtain social status unless he is married; he has no household of his own and he is not afforded any privileges. Hence, all able-bodied Trobrianders marry, with the wife’s family providing the dowry; however, biological paternity is not acknowledged and children do not automatically continue a family line. Paradoxically, Trobriand males are sexually jealous of their mates and expect their wives to remain faithful. Similar sexual freedom of choice in Samoan premarital mating was described in the oft-debated research by Margaret Mead (1928), in that Samoans condoned “light love affairs” but repudiated “acts of passionate choice” for permanent unions. According to Mead, the reconciliation between sexual activity with many lovers and virginity in marriage was effected by placing the onus of virginity on the *taupou*, a ceremonial princess in each Samoan village. She was guarded to a greater extent than other females. The *taupou* who failed to inform her attendants that she was not a virgin prior to her wedding night – mainly to make

arrangements for the provision of animal blood to be used as evidence – risked being beaten to death. Marriage was otherwise arranged between families, in cooperation with adolescents who engaged in overt sexual relations with vetted future spouses, but maintained their liaisons with the “unsuitable partners” *sub rosa*. Elwin (1947, 1968) observed the Muria people of central India in his ethnographic study conducted from 1935 to 1942. In the sexually permissive culture of the Muria, boys and girls live in a *ghotul* (a village dormitory) from the age of six or seven until marriage. Variety-seeking in terms of sexual partners is encouraged at an early stage, particularly within the younger form of *ghotul* where sleeping partners rotate and a boy may receive a fine if he sleeps with the same girl successively for more than three nights. In the older type of *ghotul*, however, boys and girls become couples and approach some semblance of sexual exclusivity. Elwin noted that some children dwell in the *ghotul* without ever having had sexual intercourse, but that “the boys and girls form a compact, loyal, friendly little republic.” Muria marriages are arranged with the aim of cementing family alliances and economic advantages. Sexual attraction is not regarded as beneficial to the marriage and Elwin reported that *ghotul* partners who eloped frequently ended up divorced. And while the Muria take pains to avoid displays of sexual jealousy within the marriage, spouses obtain sexual rights over one another; Elwin remarked that Muria wives would prevent their spouses from extramarital relations by insisting on intercourse before their husbands would leave the house. Marshall (1971) reported similar results on sexual freedom in a study of the Manganians, a Cook Island people near New Zealand. His data shows that the

focus is on sexual techniques and prowess among boys who compete in providing the greatest amount of females with the most orgasms. And although sexual compatibility is considered in marital mate selection, social standing and industrious behavior are overriding factors. Copulatory behavior after marriage changes from the male attempting to generate orgasms in the female, to achieving the highest total of coital outlets per week for himself. Mutual sexual jealousy is common, despite the fact that Manganian marriages are based on economic cooperation and neither sexual affinity nor affection figure prominently in these unions.

Another claim that Symons has made concerns the physical attributes of attractiveness in mating strategies. Previous to Symons’ publication of his evolutionary paradigm, anthropologist Clellan Ford and psychologist Frank Beach (1951) investigated cross-cultural samples from 190 population groups located in Oceania, Eurasia, Africa, North and South America. The “societies,” as they were termed by the authors, range from the well-known Marquesans in Oceania, the Yakut in Eurasia and the Ashanti in Africa, to several Native American tribes such as the Natchez and the Kickapoo, as well as bands of South American indigenous groups like the Siriono and Tupinamba. According to these researchers, cross-cultural evidence shows that there are few, if any, *universal standards* of sexual attractiveness. One generalization observed was that in most societies, the preference for younger females and their appearance received more consideration than did the youth and appearance of the male. Consistent with Symons’ assertion that economic power would be of greater significance to females than male physical attributes, Ford and Beach pointed out that the attractiveness of the male usually depends on his skills and prowess rather than on his physical appearance. A detailed study of the Northern Australian Tiwi people (Hart &

Pilling, 1960) confirmed that typically, greater hunting ability and the minimum age of thirty were correlated with enough social status for a male to acquire a first wife. In his well-known field work among the Yanomamö tribe of the Brazilian and Venezuelan Amazonas, anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon confirmed the preference among females for *unoka*, males who had demonstrated their prowess by killing other men in combat. Such males had more wives and children than males who had not achieved the same *unoka* status (1988). The reverse has generally been demonstrated in men's preference for younger women. Chagnon (1968) observed that the most desirable and sexually attractive females were described by Yanomamö males as *moko dude*, i.e. "perfectly ripe fruit." This refers to a nulliparous, postpubescent female between 15 to 18 years of age. Another observation by Ford and Beach was that a majority of societies preferred "a plump female to a slim one." In accordance with this finding, most societies prefer wide-hipped females, except for the Siberian Yakut which show a distinct dislike for these characteristics. Large, non-pendulous female breasts were also favored by several societies, particularly among the Native American Apache and Hopi. Conversely, Ford and Beach found that a significant majority of societies held certain physical attributes as undesirable or even sexually repulsive. A poor complexion, pimples, ringworm or other disfigurement of the face and body were considered unattractive; in addition, dark skin in females was considered unattractive by several societies, although albinism in humans was generally classified as defective or repulsive. The latter condition would dovetail with Symons' theories of particular traits being desirable due to their indication of physical health and fertility; aside from the absence of pigmentation rendering the albinic individual extremely sensitive to sunlight, the condition is often associated with impaired vision not easily managed in

preliterate societies with limited indoor protection from the sun.

Available cross-cultural research has also confirmed Symons' hypothesis of the male seeking sexual variety and the establishment of polygyny. Ford and Beach categorized sexual relationships in terms of long-term versus short-term mating by labeling the two definitions "mateships" and "liaisons." In 84 percent of 185 sample societies, any man was permitted to take more than one mate as either a wife or as a concubine; in contrast, women seldom established polyandrous unions. Still, while permission was available to practice polygyny for males, most actual mateship unions formed as a single partnership. Under "liaisons," Ford and Beach revealed that no society permits forming sexual associations with direct offspring. This generalization excluded instances where parents of both sexes were allowed to masturbate or sexually stimulate their young children. Strict regulations against sibling intercourse were almost as universal as the parent-child taboo; only a few societies permitted such relations, mainly due to rituals or specific social status. In addition, all societies have extended incest prohibition beyond the nuclear family unit. Wife-lending did occur, primarily as a gesture of social goodwill and hospitality. But this liberty did not extend to the woman's self-determination; 61 percent of the 139 societies in the sample for whom evidence was available, did not permit a woman to conduct extramarital liaisons. The authors, failing to note an evolutionary adaptation and bias against procreation which could potentially yield a genetically defective product, speculated that this proscription has always been influenced by social conditioning in order to avoid jealousy and family breakups.

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