

Section 1 – The Foragers

Contemporary Examples

It is one thing to make conjectures about how this sort of society might have worked for our ancient ancestors, but quite another to have living proof. Fortunately, there are still hunter-gatherer groups in remote regions, with extant cultures that function in just this way.

Anthropologist Richard B Lee, known for his work with the !Kung San, a people living in the Kalahari today, notes that most of the food eaten by the whole tribe is provided by the foraging women.¹ !Kung San women only spend fifteen hours per week foraging. They spend about three hours a day sewing, collecting firewood and water, preparing food and other domestic activities, and the rest of their time is spent in relaxing and in social activities. The inference is clear: in their culture, women are the main providers of food, not men. This fact challenges the proposition that women are dependent on male partners to provide food and surrender their sexual freedom to one man in return. In fact, in hunter-gatherer cultures all over the world and throughout history, the male hunt is incidental to the provision of food. It almost appears to be a social activity for the men, since the women's efforts provide enough food to sustain their families.

There is no natural requirement that says that a woman's partner must always be the same man. We have grown used to the idea of men and women pairing for life, but this is a recent cultural invention. Within a society where mothers group together to forage and men travel to hunt, it is not mothers and fathers who bring up children, but the community of mothers.² Within this culture, the need for men and women to pair-bond even for the time it takes to raise a child to maturity is much reduced.

A child will always know who her mother is, but she may not know her father, for a woman may have sex with several men at the time she desires to conceive. Without the artificial morality of patriarchal religion, the imperative for her is that she conceives, and having sex with multiple partners may increase the chances of this. At the same time, in such a culture, men never know which sons are their own and this strengthens the bonds of loyalty within the group of men. The male 'investment in paternity' is via the brothers of the mothers; uncles, not fathers.

¹ Lee, Richard B. *The !Kung San: Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society*. Cambridge University Press. 1979.

² This still happens, today, in many modern cultures: the women stay together to raise children communally while the men go out to work, our equivalent of hunting.

Women had status, not through force of arms or feats of physical prowess, but through the power of their bodies to make life. This arrangement ensured the survival not only of their own genes but also those of the men.