

Section 1 – The Foragers

Polyamory

Polyandry describes the practice of a woman having several male sexual partners. She has no husband in the sense that her sexuality and fertility is bound to one man. Instead, in polyandrous cultures, women have a group of occasional, semi-permanent or permanent partners. The term is the inverse of polygyny, where one man has several female sexual partners. As a general rule, polygyny is associated with extremely patriarchal cultures, for example, Islam and Mormonism. When polyandry and polygyny are operating in tandem, the culture is sometimes called ‘polyamorous’.

In a patriarchy, men are rewarded with raised status in terms of the number of high-ranking ‘target’ women they have sex with, while women who do the inverse are derided and insulted. The fact that most people assume ‘polygamy’ means ‘multiple wives’ is evidence of this prejudice, since the word means ‘many spouses’. It is a central tenet of the patriarchy that each woman’s sexuality is the property of a specific man, and this is what drives the cultural opprobrium faced by promiscuous men – they are having sex with someone else’s property.¹ Polyandry, on the other hand, is universally condemned in the patriarchy, where women are legally and socially constrained from having multiple partners.

As a result, polyandry is almost non-existent in the patriarchy. Its socially-accepted presence indicates another social order, one where women have control over their sexuality and fertility. There is a great deal of evidence to support the claim that it was once widespread, and it persists in many cultures today.

Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881) is considered by many to be the founder of modern American anthropology and influenced Darwin, Freud and Marx. In his view, early human society was based on both polygyny and polyandry, a sort of collective sexual partnership. He thought that this arrangement was, “as ancient as human society. Such a family was neither unnatural nor remarkable... It would be difficult to show any other possible beginning of the family in the primitive period.’

¹ In all patriarchal cultures a woman is either the property of her father or her husband, or failing those, her brothers or nearest male relative. The Bible condemns an unmarried woman having sex for the same reason as it does a wife having sex outside the marriage: the transgression of absolute male property right over her sexuality and reproduction. A woman’s vagina, in the patriarchy, is not hers, but the property of whichever man she ‘belongs’ to, and her life itself is of less value than his ‘legal right’.

Many other scholars and thinkers have subscribed to this view, including Darwin, who called it 'communal marriage'.

Hunter-gatherer groups, either in the past or now, rarely exceed 150-200 people. The individuals within the groups are closely related, and all know each other well; indeed the size limit of the group is governed by the approximate maximum number of people who can maintain intimate bonds. These are sexualised bonds and are a fundamental part of the structure of the society. When the group gets too big, it will split in two.

In many polyamorous cultures, children are raised by the women and the maternal uncles. However, fathers do form filial bonds, and the solution to the obvious question, 'which of a woman's partners is the father of a specific child?' is often 'they all are'. The notion that several fathers can contribute genetic material to the conception of a child and so share fatherhood is called 'partible paternity'.

For a closely related group of individuals living and moving together, this arrangement has so many advantages that it is almost illogical to assume any other model. Each male has more chances of his genes being carried forward if he has multiple receptive partners. Having many mates is also beneficial to a woman, because it means that she has multiple males associated with her and able to assist and protect her and, crucially, her children. If one of the males dies, there are others, and since no one male knows which children were fathered by him, they will tend to bond with and protect them all.

We share over 98% of our DNA with our closest primate relatives, bonobos or Dwarf Chimpanzees (*Pan paniscus*). Sex with multiple partners is normal amongst bonobos. It has been shown to increase bonding and mutual trust within the group, food-sharing, mutual co-operation and sharing of responsibilities. It reduces stress and male aggression significantly. Since all the males have multiple receptive females willing to have sex with them, there is no dominance rivalry, and rape – common in other ape species – has never been observed in bonobos, either in the wild or in captivity.²

Are there modern human cultures in which these behaviours may be observed? Are there cultures in which people live peaceful lives, where women are equal to men and violence and warfare are rare if not unknown? Societies based on non-exclusive, non-proprietary sexual bonds? If there were, that would make suggestions that the Western model is the only viable one untenable.

² Unfortunately, many researchers have tried to relate human behaviour to more distant relatives, such as the Common Chimpanzee, *Pan troglodytes*, or even use data from baboons, which are not closely related to us. They suggest that aggression, competition, rape etc., are 'natural' to humans, while ignoring the evidence from bonobos. We are sceptical of their motivation.

The answer is that there are many. In South America alone partible paternity is practised by the Aché, the Araweté, the Barí, the Canela, the Cashinahua, the Curripaco, the Ese Eja, the Kayapó, the Kulina, the Matis, the Mehinaku, the Piaroa, the Pirahã, the Secoya, the Siona, the Warao, the Yanomami, and the Ye'kwana, amongst others.³ It occurs throughout the world on all the inhabited continents.

One example is the Zo'é. Their name just means 'people'.⁴ They are also known, to some outsiders, as 'The Marrying People' because of their sexual customs. They live in the province of Pará, in the northern Brazilian rainforest, which for millennia succoured and hid them. The Zo'é are polyamorous. Both men and women have multiple partners, and women are equal in status to men.

Zo'é women are familiar with abortion-inducing herbs and use them to regulate their fertility. Babies born with defects are killed before they first cry in order to avoid 'bad luck'.³⁹ On the other hand, this is not a cruel society, but one based on love and respect. The Zo'é are semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers and monkeys are the favourite game of the hunters. If one is killed and found to have had young, these are brought back to the camp and raised alongside the human children. They are given their own hammocks and are never eaten. The Zo'é appear to regard them less as pets than as another kind of people, an expression of the closeness they feel to nature.

From the age of six, women and men wear the poturu, a wooden plug piercing the lower lip. Women keep their hair long and well coiffed, and wear decorative headdresses made of vulture-down. Apart from these, they go completely naked, but take care to conceal their vulvas when sitting. The men all wear a restraint on their penises, which they only remove in order to relieve themselves or to have sex. This is noteworthy since the phallus is regarded across human culture as the seat of male power. Men being obliged to wear a restraint on it indicates that male power is being restrained. At the same time, Zo'é women wear no such restraint and go naked; a clear indicator of the relative statures of the genders.

The life of the tribe revolves around the women and children, and older mothers are highly revered. Long after their ability to contribute to the provision of food is over, the grandmothers continue to be provided for and respected, and they enjoy a long evening of life surrounded by their families. The eldest among them are often given baby monkeys to raise when they become too old to look after a human child, indicating the reverence for motherhood within the culture.

³ Jetha & Ryan 2010.

⁴ The Zo'é themselves only use the term to differentiate from white people.

The Zo'é are partial horticulturalists. They have areas near their settlements where they cultivate manioc, bananas, sweet potatoes and urucum, which provides a red dye that the Zo'é women use to cover their bodies.⁵ They cultivate a species of bamboo, to make arrows. They also keep and breed animals and birds for eating. Pigs are regarded as having special powers and sometimes accompany the hunters to protect them from jaguars.

They have simple technologies, such as spinning wild cotton into thread. Fire is central to the society and is never allowed to go out. The people believe that their fires were lit in the dawn of time.

The hunters do not hunt their prey animals during their breeding seasons and take care not to deplete the resources that sustain them. As well as knowing plants that cause abortion, Zo'é women have an encyclopaedic knowledge of forest plants for eating and making medicines. They are comfortable, well fed and have good lives, loved by the people around them.

The Zo'é consider that they belong to the land and are part of it. They do not possess it, nor do they distinguish between themselves and their environment. Their only personal possessions are those they make themselves and are limited; women wear hair bands and bangles on their wrists and men paint intricate designs on their hunting arrows to identify them. There is no concept of wealth other than love.

Despite the fact that both women and men share sexual partners, no sign of jealousy has been observed in their culture. The people are peaceful and non-violent. Zo'é children are rarely punished except in severe cases, when they are lightly scratched with a fish bone 'to let out the bad blood'. Since, in Western cultures, violent behaviour tends to run down the generations, this must make us ask whether the violence that is endemic to modern Western society is actually a product of the culture that informs it.⁶

The Zo'é are just one of a great many examples of cultures that practise polyamory or partible paternity. These cultures are not a new development. Two thousand years ago, Julius Caesar observed of the Celtic people of Britain that: 'Ten and even twelve have wives common to them, and particularly brothers among brothers'. One woman would have several brothers as regular sexual partners. Furthermore, the Picts, who were a Brittonic Celtic people living in what is now Scotland, were matrilineal. Sons were known in reference to their mothers and property was descended through the mother's line, which almost certainly indicates the practice of polyandry.

⁵ In many ancient cultures, ochre or 'ruddle' was used in this way. It represented the blood of parturition as well as the menstrual blood of the Goddess. While we do not know the precise meaning of the Zo'é equivalent, the parallel is striking.

⁶ Consider, in this light, the well-known patriarchal aphorism 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. Patriarchal attitudes are imprinted on children through violence and this is then passed on down the generations.

Nor is there anything secretive about sex in polyamorous cultures. Captain James Cook spent three months in Tahiti in 1769 while exploring the Pacific. He noted that the Tahitians 'gratified every appetite and passion before witnesses.' John Hawkesworth's official record of the journey explains:

'(a) young man perform(ed) the rites of Venus with a ... girl about 11 or 12 years of age, before several of our people and a great number of natives, without the least sense of its being indecent or improper, but, as appeared, in perfect conformity to the custom of the place.'⁷

Cook corroborates this and notes that there were many women in the watching crowd who called advice to the girl in a good-humoured and encouraging way, but

'Young as she was, she did not seem to (need) it.'⁸

Sex in this community was nothing to be ashamed of or hidden away, but an everyday part of life, indulged in by women as eagerly as men, with multiple partners. Similar behaviours were found all over the Pacific and Africa. Indeed the principal role of Christian missionaries to these places was to destroy their natural culture, which the people had been enjoying for thousands of years with no ill-effects, and replace it with the hidebound, patriarchal one of Europe. The notions that women are sexually reluctant, and that the exclusive pattern for human society is monogamous pair-bonding, turn out to be anything but natural.

Cook also noted the 'two-group' structure of the local communities and other details typical of polyamorous cultures.^{9,10} These included, to Cook's evident dismay, a complete lack of comprehension of the notion of personal property, which resulted in the islanders helping themselves to anything that took their fancy. He appears to have become inured to this, as this note from his log of 20 June suggests: 'I now gave over all thought of recovering any of the things the natives had stolen from us.'¹¹

Another current example of a polyamorous culture exists in the Mosuo or Na people of China. These people were first reported by Marco Polo in 1265. They still live where they lived then, on

⁷ Hawkesworth, John. *An account of the voyages undertaken by the order of His present Majesty*. London 1773.

⁸ Captain Cook's Log Entry for 14 May 1769 (<http://southseas.nla.gov.au/journals/cook/17690514.html>).

⁹ <http://southseas.nla.gov.au/journals/cook/17690505.html>

¹⁰ Captain Cook was a professional mariner and his log entries are typical of the type: mainly dry, informative and factual. Nevertheless his sense of amazement and culture shock comes through clearly, especially in gems such as this, 'the Women were so very liberal with their favours'. (6 June 1769.)

¹¹ <http://southseas.nla.gov.au/journals/cook/17690620.html>

the shore of a lake called Lugu. The Mosuo worship Lugu as the Mother Goddess. The mountain that rises above it, Ganmo, is also revered, as the goddess of love. The Mosuo are a famously tranquil and relaxed people. Their pictographic language, called Dongba, the only such still being used today, tellingly contains no words for 'murder', 'war' or 'rape'!

The Mosuo are matrilineal. The family name and property pass through the female side and the family revolves around the group of mothers. Traditionally, they do not marry or 'pair-bond' at all. Instead, Mosuo girls, when they become sexually mature, are given bedrooms with two doors, one into a common courtyard shared by the family and the other into the street. This door is to allow men to enter her bedroom, which the Mosuo call her 'Flower Room' or 'babahuago'. The girl has full control over who may enter her bedroom from the street and needs no permission from anyone.¹² She can have as many different sexual partners in a night as she wishes, and while she may see the same one again and again, they all must be gone by daybreak.

If she becomes pregnant, the baby is raised in the matriarchal household where she lives, with the aid of her brothers. There is no paternal role in Mosuo culture for the biological father; this role is played by the uncles, who, of course, are out every night visiting other Mosuo women. They have to do this because they are not allowed to sleep in the matriarchal household!

There is no 'parental investment' for biological fathers in this culture whatsoever. The people worship the Mother Goddess, and the society consists of collective groups centred on mothers and their children.

Sadly, the Mosuo have had to suffer much abuse from both missionaries and government officials trying to eradicate their culture. As a result of this, the 'walking marriage' as described above now exists alongside patriarchally-derived models. Nevertheless, the fact that such a society should survive at all after so much pressure attests to its resilience.

Yet another example can be found in the four million or so Minangkabau people who live in Western Sumatra, part of Indonesia. Fascinatingly, they are Muslim, having converted in the 16th century. Though clearly this is in conflict with the patriarchal code of Sharia Law, the Minangkabau are matrilineal, with property and family names passing through the mother. According to the anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday, who has spent over twenty years studying them, they consider themselves to be a matriarchal society. They resolve this through their *adat* or ethnic tradition, which for them exists in parallel with their faith. In common with the practices in other parts of Asia such as the Philippines and Thailand, animist belief is a part of Minang society, and animism is often associated with matriarchal, Goddess-worshipping

¹² Least of all her father, whose identity is impossible for her to know.

cultures. According to Sanday, Minangs revere a mythical Queen Mother, and women's prestige increases with age. They favour cooperation over competition, which is also typical of matriarchal cultures.¹³

The preceding are only a few examples from what remains, despite millennia of attempts to crush them, a significant number of polyamorous cultures across the globe. In all we see a similar set of characteristics: the people are non-violent and peaceful; rape is unknown; children are treated kindly and never punished severely and sexual jealousy, a cause of discord and violence, does not appear. In addition, in many such cultures, the notion of possession of property either does not exist or is restricted to items like personal jewellery or hunting weapons.

¹³ Sanday, Peggy Reeves. *Matriarchal Values and World Peace: The Case of the Minangkabau*. Paper delivered to the 2nd World Congress on Matriarchal Studies, University of San Marcos, Texas 2005. (see <http://www.second-congress-matriarchal-studies.com/>).