Sexual life of primitive people

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PREFACE

To most lay people the established order of sex relationships and marriage seems something so self-evident and stable that they cannot conceive the possibility of a variation in the established order. Yet here, as in all things, the law of evolution applies. Our sexual system is the outcome of a long continuous series of changes beginning with the very dawn of human history. To understand the modern sex problem rightly it is essential to know its origin and gradual development.

Most of the material about the sex life of primitive people is inaccessible to the ordinary reader, being hidden away in learned treatises and ponderous scientific works. The translators are, therefore, glad to have found in Fehlinger’s book a short comprehensive outline of the subject, which may serve as a convenient introduction.

S. H.
F. H.

Manchester,
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SEXUAL LIFE OF
PRIMITIVE PEOPLE

I

MODESTY AMONG PRIMITIVE PEOPLE

In cold and temperate climates, it is necessary to clothe the body as a protection against cold. In hot parts of the world, the need for protection against the effects of the weather by means of clothing disappears, and therefore in those regions primitive people go about naked. It is only when they come under the influence of foreign civilisation that they put on clothing. It is erroneous to assume that clothing came into use because of an inborn sexual modesty. In Australia, in the Indonesian and Melanesian islands, in tropical Africa, and in South America, there are still many peoples that go about naked. It is true that many of them cover their sex organs; but the contrivances used for this purpose are not in reality intended to hide the sex region, though to our mind they seem to do so.

Primitive people do not cover their bodies out of modesty; “the sinfulness of nakedness” is unknown to them. Karl von den Steinen (pp. 190, 191) says
that the naked Indian tribes of the Xingu region of Brazil know no secret parts of the body. "They joke about these parts in words and pictures quite unabashed, so that it would be foolish to call them indecent. They are envious of our clothing, as of some precious finery; they put it on and wear it in our presence with a complete disregard of the simplest rules of our own society, and in complete ignorance of its purpose. This proves that they still possess the pristine guilelessness of Adam and Eve in Eden. Some of them celebrate the advent of puberty in members of both sexes by noisy festivals, when the 'private parts' come in for a good deal of general attention. If a man wishes to inform a stranger that he is a father, or a woman that she is a mother, they gravely denote the fact by touching the organs from which life springs, in a most spontaneous and natural manner. It is, therefore, not possible to understand these people properly unless we put aside our conception of 'clothing,' and take them and their manners in their own natural way."

The absence of sexual modesty in our sense also struck von Steinen when questions about words arose. If he asked about a word which to our minds might give cause for shame, the reply was given without hesitation or any semblance of shame. Nevertheless, conversations about sexual subjects gave the Indians, men and women, decided pleasure; but their merry laughter was "neither impudent, nor did it give the
impression of hiding an inward embarrassment. It had, however, a slightly erotic tone, and resembled the laughter aroused by the jokes in our own spinning-rooms, by games of forfeits, and by other harmless jokes exchanged in intercourse between the sexes, although the occasions and accompanying circumstances must be so very different among truly primitive people."

Naked savages are, however, not devoid of sexual modesty. It shows itself immediately when any remark addressed to them can be construed as an invitation to sexual intercourse, or when coarse jokes are made about sexual subjects. This is clearly shown in an account by Koch-Grünberg (I., p. 307). His European companion wanted to perform a kind of stomach dance before some savage Indians of the Upper Rio Negro, such as is danced in places of ill repute in Brazilian towns. The very indecent movements of the dancer caused the women and girls to retire shyly. The European in his attempt to "entertain" the company failed completely. Yet one can converse quietly with these Indians on all sexual subjects so long as they are natural; it is only obscenity that shocks them.

According to Eylmann, the Australians, at least the men, show no modesty in sex matters, though they are by no means devoid of it in other respects. Thus, e.g., they are ashamed of any mutilation of their bodies. Young men do not cover their sex organs, but the old
ones do so, because they seem to be aware that this part of the body, of which they were once so proud, bears signs of old age. The women also rarely make use of an apron, yet they show clearly marked sexual modesty. A woman is always very careful not to expose the external sex organs when she sits or lies down in the presence of men. The greatest decency is observed during the time of menstruation.

In Indonesia the feeling of modesty among those tribes that are in constant contact with Europeans is essentially different from that of the tribes less under foreign influence. Thus Nieuwenhuis (I., pp. 133, 134) mentions, for instance, the Bahaus and Kenyas of Central Borneo. Of these the latter are only slightly influenced by the Mohammedan Malays, the former, however, relatively much more so. Although members of both tribes bathe completely naked, yet the Bahaus dress immediately after the bath, whilst the Kenyas go naked to and from the bath. The Kenya women also go naked to the spring to bring water and to bathe their children. Whilst getting the boats through the rapids the Kenya men take off their loin-cloths, but the Bahau men never do this. When Nieuwenhuis' expedition stayed some time among the Kenyas, it was noticed that the people got out of the habit of going about naked at times. This was only because the Malays and Bahaus belonging to the expedition had told the Kenyas that the white people objected to the naked appearance of the natives (which was not