Farming and Seclusion of Girls at Puberty

The following is based on the email correspondence between the admin of this website and a learned blogger on Anthropology. The intention of publishing these excerpts is to answer some questions various people may have in mind about the topic of seclusion of girls. (Please note that some high-lighting and footnotes were added for the purpose of this post. Some spelling mistakes in the original emails were also corrected.)

**Anthropology Website:** “I don't believe there was any "seclusion of girls at puberty": it’s before farming! All those repressive ideas arrived with farming, herding and therefore incipient forms of slavery as in patriarchy.

*Hunter-gatherer societies do not have such absurd ideas: not a single one of them!* There are of course cultural variants but they are invariably communist, egalitarian and democratic.”

**Admin:** “Please let me quote you without your name in my blog and answer this critique. I consider it to be a good point to be answered. I also like to discuss this in my current work.”

**Anthropology Website:** “Feel free to quote if you think it's useful. It is in any case just my opinion but I feel justified based on the anthropology of hunter-gatherers. Please, do not confuse with "primitive" farmers such as Papuans or most Native American peoples, it is a common misunderstanding that causes the wrong kind of conclusions: when studying hunter-gatherers, be certain that their economy is or was until very recently exclusively about foraging, "mixed" economies with some farming/herding and some foraging should be classified always as farmer economies.”

**Admin:** “I don’t intend to waste your time. I beg to differ as the practice may be 40Kyr old as I reasoned in the attached working paper. If you have 60 secs, this may give you the flavour. Aboriginal people never had farming. At least it shows a new perspective. *(Reference to Antiquity of Secluding Girls at Puberty)*”
Anthropology Website: “Pretty interesting. I was not aware that such practices existed among Australian Aborigines.

However, before I can conclude that the practice was widespread in Eurasia, I would have to know of it existing among some other Asian hunter-gatherers, of which there are quite a few (in South, SE and North Asia, as well as among the Native Americans). Otherwise it may well be a cultural founder effect exclusive of Australasia.

Admin:”....... There were many other people practising seclusion including SAN people of South Africa. For additional stuff, I can refer you to Sir G.J.Frazer's 'Balder The Beautiful' or 'The Golden Bough'. My web site has some references, too. Perhaps, you may see why your opinion about the nexus between slavery and seclusion doesn't hold. Rather, as I reason in my other 'working' papers, Seclusion exalted girl's position.” (G.J. Frazer should be corrected to J.G.Frazer - Admin)

Anthropology Website: “'The Golden Bough' was written in 1890. I don't reject it's interest but it's like studying Anthropology on Engels' "The Origin of Family, Private Property and State" (1884) or its main source "Ancient Society" of Lewis H. Morgan (1877). They are great works for their age but one wonders if all what is in them is correct (sometimes not quite). I would appreciate more recent field studies or at the very least critical reviews.

The main problem I see with these all-encompassing theoretical anthropologists is that they never actually made themselves the field work whose results they used. So for me it would be much more credible if the seclusion practices were referred to the original field study and, even better, if later studies have confirmed this practice. I'm not saying it's some sort of erudite myth but I would really like to have a stronger confirmation, really. Certainly, a lot of societies, ancient and modern alike, never had such "purity" taboos, so it's obvious that they could break free from such superstitions.

One problem I find to seclusion is that hunter-gatherers are generally on the move, so keeping people in one place for weeks or months is extremely impractical[1]. And at the very least other hunter-gatherers do not practice any such rites. Some of them do not even dispose of their dead, what directly challenges the somewhat "religious" ideas on
the so-called "modern human behavior" organized around an alleged symbolism (art, beliefs and rites) that is often non-existent or very tenuous in fact. Another reason is that their societies normally only have spontaneous hierarchies, so I find extremely difficult for them to enforce any rule unless there is a very strong consensus on it, and, even then, not if the affected individual rebels. Not just "spontaneous" (emotional) violence (sometimes with result of death) is relatively common inside hunter-gatherer groups but also "voting with the feet", i.e. *moving to another camp or even to a new territory altogether*[^2]. Keeping the group together therefore requires a continuous work of creation and reinforcement of consensus and emotional bonds, what implies that you can’t force almost anything on others. Of course kids of that age are probably manipulated by their elders and the community's superstitions but I'm in any case in disbelief about this kind of practices being widespread. I may be wrong, of course.”

**Admin:** “Thanks for the lengthy response. I can appreciate your concern about the old books and importance of field work. I grew up in a country where seclusion was practised so heavily. But when I visit there now, the practice is almost dead. Over the years, due to shrinking of distance around the globe, traditions started to die. Thus, to me, The Golden Bough is a time capsule. I do not wish to comment on Engle's work as his was a political statement. In Engle's case, he had dialectical laws to fit the world into. As he said in Anti-Duhring, 'the same laws...form the thread running through the history of development of human thought'. If Frazer had an agenda, it had perhaps been to find examples for Bastian's ideas. Thus, I would treat Frazer's work as far more facts-based anthropological investigations than Engle's. Interpretation of Frazer's work can be done by anyone using his facts though his interpretations, in phenomenological sense, have a better chance to be very close to what the people in the original plot thought. I like these old writings without modernist interpretations because I fear twisted worldviews which are shaped by Evolutionist view or some other kind of point of view like a feminist view, far removed from the simplicity and reality of the bygone era. Here, I can see parallels to processual and post-processual debate. No amount of fieldwork on this subject can bring you back what had passed by. Sometimes, an armchair investigator can have the insights which the original researcher didn't have. The reason is simple. Nobody can claim the monopoly of good insights. I believe that the value of an insight
is about how well it explains the facts known and coming to light in future; not how much field work the person with insight did undertake. It is easy for a person working in the field to strike upon a great insight even though it wouldn't be guaranteed. It is also true that from a distance, you can see the picture in a different light which eludes the painter.

[1] I didn’t bother myself answering this. It is generally accepted that the movements of hunter-gatherers are seasonal to some extent. Here, I shall only refer to Dr. Richard B. Lee who wrote about !Kung Bushman of Botswana that “the Bushmen typically occupy a camp for weeks or months and literally eat their way out of it”. They stayed in the same camp site even after exhausting the nearby resources. From their usual camp site, they would simply travel beyond the nearby area for new food sources. It is noteworthy that, according to Lee, !Kung during 1960’s were confined to less resourceful lands than what they had before, making them more likely to move around yet staying put for longer times. There may not be picture perfect similarity between these modern hunter-gatherers and pre-historic people who might have scavenged as well. However, as accepted by many, some behaviours can still be deemed as relevant.

[2] Again I would like to refer to Lee, leaving the question about authority for another time. Bushmen he studied had camps around wells. The composition of these camps changed frequently over the year and even day-to-day. Even if person or a group leaves to another territory, staying in the new location would be dependent on local resources which should not necessarily result in regular movement.

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