

Attitudes to and incidence of infanticide. Alan Macfarlane

In a survey of the subject, Westermarck gave instances from all types of civilization. He outlined some of the motives. 'Among a great number of uncivilised peoples it is usual to kill an infant if it is a bastard, or if its mother dies, or if it is deformed or diseased, or if it for some reason or other is regarded as an unlucky child.'¹ There are other motives. 'Among various savages it is the custom that, if a woman gives birth to twins, one or both of them are destroyed.'² Or again, 'Among some peoples mothers are said to kill their new-born infants on account of the trouble of rearing them, or the consequent loss of beauty. Another cause is the long suckling time, generally lasting, among savages, for two, three, four years...'³ Westermarck continues that 'In another respect, also, the long suckling-time is an inducement to infanticide; among certain Australian tribes an infant is killed immediately on birth "when the mother is, or thinks she is, unable to rear it owing to there being a young child whom she is still feeding".'⁴

Infanticide is particularly prevalent in hunter-gatherer groups where long breast-feeding and infanticide are often linked. 'Up to fifty percent of pre-contact hunter-gatherer groups practiced infanticide', Birdsell estimated; 'systematic infanticide has been a necessary procedure for spacing human children, presumably beginning after man's entry into the niche of bi-pedalism, and lasting until the development of advanced agriculture. It involved between fifteen and fifty percent of the total number of births.'⁵ Others put the figures even higher. Howell writes that 'all observers agree that infanticide is a universal or near-universal trait in hunter-gatherer societies.'⁶ For instance, among a group called the Eipo, 'an unusually careful study shows that between a quarter and a third of all live births are killed, especially births of girls.'⁷

As Westermarck wrote, among many peoples 'infanticide is not restricted to more or less exceptional cases, but is practised on a much larger scale. Custom often decides how many children are to be reared in each family, and not infrequently the majority of infants are destroyed.'⁸ In particular it is thought to be related to scarce resources and hence a danger of extreme want if there are too many children. 'Urgent want is frequently represented by our authorities as the main cause of infanticide; and their statements are corroborated by the conspicuous prevalence of this custom among poor tribes and in islands whose inhabitants are confined to a narrow territory with limited resources.'⁹ For instance, infanticide was customary on the pacific island of Tikopia¹⁰ as in many south sea islands. Westermarck noted that 'In some of the principal groups of Polynesia it was practised publicly and systematically,

¹ Westermarck, *Moral*, i, p.394

² Westermarck, *Moral*, i, p.395

³ Westermarck, *Morals*, i, p.398-9

⁴ Westermarck, *Morals*, i, p.399

⁵ Birdsell, Lee and De Vore, p.236

⁶ Howell in Coleman (Ed), *Population*, p.182

⁷ Coleman (Ed), *Population*, p.30

⁸ Westermarck, *Morals*, i, p.396; see also Godelier, *Malthus* (xerox), p.141

⁹ Westermarck, *Morals*, i, p.400

¹⁰ Firth, *Elements*, p.202

without compunction, to an extent almost incredible. During the whole period of his residence in the Society Islands, Ellis does not recollect having met with a single pagan woman who had not imbrued her hands in the blood of her offspring, and he thinks that there, as also in the Sandwich Islands, two-thirds of the children were destroyed by their parents.¹¹ Given the fact that England and Japan are islands with visibly limited resources, we might expect infanticide to be prevalent.

The anthropological literature warns us against making any deductions from the level of infanticide to the presence or absence of love of children. Hocart noted that 'In ancient Greece exposure often proceeded from affection for the previous children, from a desire to procure for them a standard of living which numbers would have made impossible.'¹² Nadel observed that Eskimos and Chinese practiced infanticide extensively, 'even though they loved children and had a high desire for progeny.'¹³ It is often thought that one of the reasons why infants are usually killed at birth is because it is least emotionally painful then. 'That the custom of infanticide is generally restricted to the destruction of new-born babies also appears from various statements as to the parental love of those peoples who are addicted to this practice. In Fiji "such children as are allowed to live are treated with a foolish fondness." Among the Narrinyeri, "only let it be determined that an infant's life shall be saved, and there are no bounds to the fondness and indulgence with which it is treated".¹⁴ We shall bear this in mind when studying an institution which, as David Hume wrote, is 'shocking to nature',¹⁵ and of which we usually have no experience.¹⁶

Another feature which is evident in the anthropological record is that the attitude to infanticide depends very much on conceptions of personhood, that is when the infant becomes 'human'. This is well described by Hocart. 'In some countries there is a ritual reason; as long as the child has not gone through some sacrament it is not accounted a full human being or a member of the tribe. In Athens the decision was made prior to the amphidromia, a ceremony at which the child was carried round the hearth and so associated with the cult of the ancestors. The Frisian father could destroy the child only before the child had taken food and by this act had entered into communion.'¹⁷ This will again be important when we come to investigate the Japanese and English cases, with their very different religious traditions.

¹¹ Westermarck, *Morals*, i, p.396-97

¹² Hocart, *Enc.* p.27

¹³ Nadel, *Foundation*, p.271

¹⁴ Westermarck, *Morals*, i, p.404-5

¹⁵ Hume, *Essays*, p.235

¹⁶ For some further comments based on anthropological literature, see Scheper-Hughes(ed.), *Child Survival*, (Haddon -KNM -sch(a)).

¹⁷ ref xxx