Chapter 3

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Expensive little cherubs

In the USA, spending on children and a focus on the importance of children has increased dramatically in recent years. Parents will often spare no cost to ensure that the lives of their children are documented, and that children are provided with the best that their parents can afford to purchase for them. In Japan, a similar attitude has developed, with the needs of even an unborn child placed as a top priority for the mother. These attitudes are taken as the norm, and extend to the elaborate way that infants are mourned when they die. This is in marked contrast to most traditional societies, where unwanted or female infants are often killed or abandoned. The high value that is placed on infant life in some societies today has by no means always been common.

Calculating the costs

Among the Ache and other foragers, the availability of resources often determines whether or not a child will be kept by its parents. Children that the parents are not able or willing to support are often abandoned without hesitation. In Brazil and South Africa, mothers often develop a fatalistic attitude towards the death of an infant, neglecting children and withdrawing access to breast milk in order to preserve their own health. A mother may abandon or ignore a child that is less likely to survive, thus saving resources that she can offer to a new child or use herself. These strategies are adaptive measures that help women to cope with the loss of children and better care for viable infants.

The value attached to infants in antiquity

The societies of ancient Greece routinely exposed defective or unwanted infants, with the famous philosophers Plato and Aristotle arguing for measures that would limit the size of poor families.

Infanticide, especially of female infants, was common, increasing and decreasing during some periods. However, those infants that were kept were cared for and named. The societies of ancient Rome and China had similar views on infanticide, and also used abortion to dispose of unwanted infants. Even now, several studies show that infanticide is practiced by two thirds of the societies studied by ethnographers. While infanticide is penalized in most modern societies, it is still not an uncommon practice.

Little angels

The Aztecs, Maya and Inca all sacrificed children, believing that the purity of children made them better intermediaries with the gods. The Tongans and the Phoenicians of ancient Carthage also sacrificed children, as did the Jews until the 6th century B.C.E. Some cultures also sacrificed children to accompany adults in the afterlife.

Children can serve a religious purpose without being sacrificed. Egyptian tomb paintings depict children serving their parents, and children can be donated to the service of a particular god, often gaining favor for their parents. Some cultures believe that children are reincarnations of the ancestors, or semi-divine. Children are viewed according to the needs of their parents and culture.

Save the children

The emperors Augustus and Hadrian, and later, the early Christian church, tried to stop the practice of infanticide, but the official policies that would have protected children and prohibited infanticide were not easily enforceable. When brought to court, infanticide was tried in church courts, rather than civil courts, as it was considered a less serious crime. During the early medieval period parents were encouraged to give their unwanted children to the church as oblates, but the amount of children that they received forced the church to set up homes for the excess children. These houses continued to receive many children, even with appallingly high mortality rates, and were sometimes supported by monarchs. In China the situation was much the same. The children who were abandoned to the care of church or state often died, or were farmed out to work as servants.

Little demons

As Christianity became more widespread, native cultures had trouble complying with the ban on infanticide. Infanticide was often justified by claiming that the child was a changeling, brought by goblins. If a child was left outside, tortured or neglected, and died as a result, the parents were not considered to have killed a human child. Many other cultures used the same justification of changeling to neglect or kill their children. The Korowai of New Guinea would also use the stigma of witchcraft to justify killing children. Even if a child is not killed outright, it may die because of neglect.

Children as chattel

Throughout history, children have often been treated as chattel, or slaves, with parents able to sell them. In Rome, children were often sold into slavery. In India, lower-caste girls were often sold as child brides, and the Ottoman Empire demanded a child from each family to serve the emperor. Slavery was also present in Europe, and in rural Japan the daughters of poor families would be regularly sold as prostitutes. During the Revolutionary War, boys were sometimes sold as substitute soldiers for older men. Slavery continues in some areas of the world, especially Africa, but with instances of child trafficking and exploitation found in more developed countries, such as the US, as well.

Child workers

In most cultures, children are expected to work as soon as they are able to be useful. Among the Kpelle, good children are those that work well and without complaint. As opportunities for children to work and provide their parents with money arise, more parents send their children to work. While they will be put to work, useful children are more likely to be nurtured and to survive. The Industrial Revolution led parents to place their children in factories as soon as they were able to work. Child labor laws were often vehemently opposed by parents who wanted a child to bring home wages and “begin to pay back for its keep”.

Children in paradise

In many foraging societies, children enjoy almost unparalleled freedom and nurturing. Some traits commonly displayed by foraging peoples include a lack of physical discipline for the child, cuddling of infants, postpartum sex taboos, long birth spacing, tolerance for the behavior of children, communal care, and respect for a child's individuality. The low birth rate in foraging societies increases the value of those children that are born, and they either learn the skills that they need to learn and survive, or die. Foraging has become much less common as a lifestyle in recent years.

The priceless child

In the USA, most children work only for personal gain, and parents often incur great expense in raising children, but expect no monetary return from their offspring. The modern Western attitude towards children was evidenced in England during the eighteenth century, and the idea of using children as a means of personal fulfillment and comfort has only increased since then. The death of children has become a matter of public concern. Many people adopt children not related to them in any way, and parenting has become a fulfilling personal hobby, something to be desired, and a chance to shape a child in one's own image. This recent change has little in common with the way that children have been viewed in most cultures throughout history.