

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE GENDER WITHOUT HISTORY

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Richard Wilk is an ethnographer who did his first field work among the Kekchi Maya of southern Belize (Wilk, 1991). He tells the story of an interview that he once carried out with a village elder. The interviewee was an old man who was well respected and of high status. His equally elderly wife was ostensibly excluded from this discussion between men by staying behind the walls of her house in her "private space", while the men conferred out front in the open. As the ethnographer began to ask the old man questions, however, the old woman made her presence known.

"How long have you been married?" Rick asked.

"45 years," said the old man, but an irritated voice from inside the house said, "47."

Without blinking, the old man said, "47."

"How many grandchildren do you have?" asked Rick.

"19," said the old man. "21, you idiot," said the voice from the house.

"Uh, 21," corrected the old man.

"Gee," said Rick, beginning to feel uncomfortable, "how long have you lived in this village?"

The old man hesitated in silence for a moment until "Since 1942," said the voice behind the wall.

"Since 1942," said the old man, as though he had just come up with it himself.

In effect, the voice behind the wall controlled this entire interview, although the visible old man behaved as if only he could

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hear the voice. Of course the Kekchi have been identified as patriarchal and when I first heard this story, I thought the old woman was amazing to stand up to her husband after years of domination or that perhaps this was an indication of the latitude allowed post-menopausal women, but now I have changed my mind. If the man had been behind the wall, and the woman out front having her every word challenged and contradicted, I would have taken this as an indication of male domination. So if the woman is behind the wall, I see the wall as an indication of male dominance. If the woman is in front of the wall, I see the voice as an indication of male dominance. I realized that there were no conditions under which I would be able to see a woman not dominated. This is a perceptual problem I seem to share with many anthropologists and especially with my fellow archaeologists.

This experience got me wondering: "what if we couldn't assume the relationship between women and men in ancient civilizations was any more obvious than the significance of the wall in front of the Kekchi woman?" What if the political and economic subordination of women wasn't a given for prehistoric or precontact societies; what if things really *were* different before the world system? What if, in fact, the inferior role of women in complex political economies is really a result of integration into the world system? Would we know? *How* would we know?

I have been thinking about this set of questions for almost three years. I set a group of students to work on figuring out what exactly we do know about ancient women, and we came up with some surprising results. Together we investigated two questions in the context of nine cultures.

The first question we asked was framed by Eric Wolf. In *Europe And The People Without History* (1982) Wolf argues that western ideas about cultural purity and the discreteness of tradition blossomed within anthropology. He then shows how the model of cultural isolates allowed ethnographers to see cross-cultural similarities as the result of

human nature rather than the result of contacts and interrelations. The result was a naive, inaccurate and often inherently racist construction of cultural difference, promoted inadvertently by scholars who were actually trying to be open-minded.

We asked: *what if Eric Wolf's critique was applied to the anthropology of women instead of to whole cultures?* What if the role of women has always been seen by merchants, missionaries, anthropologists and other social scientists through the lens of a sexist capitalist system, and manipulated accordingly, so that both the ethnohistoric and ethnographic records of cross cultural similarity in gender roles are the result of recorder bias and historical contact? What if, instead of having their great quantity and variety cancel out the random bias of particular observers, the vast majority of the Human Relations Area Files are biased in exactly the same way? This problem is less obvious than it seems, and it is not easy to correct, as can be shown by looking at Wolf's own arguments.

Wolf does not address gender directly, although he discusses how relations between men and women were affected by the economic changes that were encouraged and spread by European capitalism. When Wolf does discuss changes in the division of labor, his treatment is particularly instructive. For example, in discussing the economic relations that developed between Portuguese traders and the people of the Kongo, Wolf explains that Kongoles organization was matrilineal and a system of bridewealth and gifts initiated by royal lineages and redistributed to lower ranking lineages was the economic backbone of lineage power. He argues that participation in the slave trade with the Portuguese fundamentally changed this system. This new source of revenue made wealth and status objects available directly to lower-ranking lineages, allowing them to compete for power with higher ranking groups and undermining the power held by ranked matrilineages. Wolf argues that matrilineality gave way to patrilineal clusters because participation in slave trade

required more manpower for slave hunting which in turn resulted in men laying claim to their own children produced by their own slaves.

Wolf's argument rescues Kongolese men from essentialism by showing how their system was made more "standard" through historical contact with the Portuguese. But his explanation still leaves women without history. This happens in two ways. First, while Wolf rejects characterization of "peripheral" cultures as timeless and traditional, he accepts the existence of timeless matrilineality, a system "discovered" and recorded by European male anthropologists that allows women a visible position in social structure but still places control of most resources in the hands of men: uncles and brothers rather than fathers and husbands. Whether this might have been a biased interpretation of Kongolese culture is not discussed. Second, and more importantly, when Wolf describes the change from matrilineality to patrilineality, he attributes it to the need for more men to participate in the taking of slaves. This to him is implicitly a natural outcome of an emphasis on a violent mercantile economy. The possibility that women might have participated in warfare and raiding either directly or through continuing to lay claim to the male offspring of their slaves and maintenance of economic control does not get consideration.

Here is a classic situation that lends itself to critical questioning. A preexisting system in which women received some sort of recognition, pigeon-holed by anthropologists accustomed to an essentialized view of culture as "matrilineal," becomes patrilineal as a result of interaction with western capitalism, in this case, from Portugal. The cause is said to be economic change which favored male strategies over female strategies as though the two were inherently different. This construction goes unquestioned because the lack of participation by women in the new system is implicitly attributed to the nature of womanhood, not to the nature of the European influence. But really; wouldn't the patriarchal view of the

world and the essentialist European perspective of the Portuguese toward women have influenced the nature of change in lineage power? Would Portuguese sailors looked for women to help them catch slaves or negotiate trade agreements? Implicit assumptions about gender shape historical constructions without ever becoming a topic of discussion.

The process through which modern capitalism fosters hegemony over local economies typically occurs in part through the naturalization of western gender distinctions within the local system. In fact, establishing the political and economic subordination of women within local systems regardless of their previous situation, is one of the primary modes of capitalist expansion. Recent research on beauty pageants provides an important example of how this process works and explains how by essentializing gender, local groups become complicit in their own exploitation (Wilk, 1996). The question for us regarding early civilizations is whether gender subordination can be a strategy of any expansionist state, or is a special feature of western capitalism. Marx was clearly correct in his assertion that capitalism would necessarily have a profound impact on gender roles, but Engels (1884) position was slightly different. He proposed that the rise of class-based society and state hierarchies, which moved away from kinship as a source of status and power, must therefore necessarily undermine the status of women. Women's social value, he reasoned, must come from the family. Clearly Engels had an essentialized view of women; he also had no data from the time periods about which he speculated.

Which leads to a second question, one not asked by Wolf: *what if Engels was wrong and class stratification per se does not cause gender subordination?* What if kin based systems are not necessarily the source of female power and authority? What if there really were early civilizations in which gender was not the determining factor we believe it must be; where men and women competed on the same field or even in which women

controlled the political economy? How would we know? What if there were once other possibilities for cultures before the modern world system – Engels didn't have any data about such societies, because it would almost have to be archaeological.

We took these questions to the archaeological record of nine cultures. In each case we attempted to separate out the assumptions about ancient gender roles from the actual bits of relevant data. All investigators were wary of ethnographic analogy, and questioned traditional ethnographic categories. We tried to focus on a particular ancient culture at the point of its transition to complexity, to statehood, to civilization. This led to problems, since this transition is hard to identify in most cases (and controversial) and partakes of the very same evolutionary assumptions that plague gender studies. Was Zimbabwe or Cahokia or Viking Denmark really a complex society? A state? Are we seeking objective characteristics or are we measuring the Moche against Greece or the Harappans against Washington, DC? In the end, we simply looked at a variety of relatively unrelated groups during the period when each group began to show evidence of social status distinctions based on economic differences. This seemed like the closest we could come to testing Engels original proposition against non-European, or pre-European societies.

Almost every case study resulted in a debate not only about the status of women, but about the status of their culture. And invariably, the stronger the public role of women, the less likely archaeologists are to characterize a culture as a civilization. Were women powerful because state organization had not developed or because the state that had developed did not subjugate them? Ultimately we were able to show that the rise of social classes with economic and political reality and a decisive signature in the archaeological record pretty clearly corresponds to the subjugation of women as a subordinate class at the onset of rising status distinctions *in only one culture*, one where it may have existed already. All our

investigations consistently demonstrated that cultural evolutionism involves so much misunderstanding and essentializing of the division of labor and the significance of gender, it is clear we need a new framework for organizing our data.

Another problem we faced was the obvious historical inter-relatedness of several of the civilizations investigated. While it would be ridiculous to claim cultural continuity between Mesopotamia or Greece and Viking Scandinavia, it would be equally foolish to ignore the history of Scandinavian or Zimbabwean economic and political interaction with earlier or contemporary expansionist states, even before the transformational impacts of Christianity and Islam. Having made a case for the impact of capitalism through the world system on the role (and the perceived role) of women, yet I am not willing to assume that only industrialized capitalism can or has used this mechanism of dispersal and control. Another way to characterize the phenomenon might be the "underdevelopment of women."

Our findings are reported at length elsewhere (in press), but here I will just give a brief overview to make some general points about the archaeological reconstruction of women's roles in complex societies. Instances in which a lack of clear male dominance seemed to have affected archaeologist's opinions about whether the culture in question had achieved a state level of organizational complexity include investigations of Moundville, Harappa, and the Vikings. In cases where organizational complexity is not much at issue, even the flimsiest evidence of gender difference becomes evidence of subordination, as with the Moche, the early Ageans, and surprisingly – Harappa! In cases where gender differences seem more obvious as with the Maya and the Sumerians, no attempt is made to use data to interrogate assumptions or test hypotheses, and negative evidence is gendered. If women are underrepresented in a sample, this is considered normal, if men are, further investigation is undertaken. And when things get really desperate, powerful women can

always be designated “priestesses” to get them out of the economy, or as mother of the king, to get them out of politics. Invariably, in every culture area, the direct historic approach is used to construct and reinforce models of ancient gender hierarchies with data from colonial periods.

Although many archaeologists have begun to situate the civilizations they study in an historical framework, gender roles are still not treated as variable or influenced by historic contacts. Tracy Luedke looked at data from Great Zimbabwe and found that archaeologists still regard women *a priori* as “keepers of tradition,” not only outside of, but resistant to historical processes. To date, study of the remains of great Zimbabwe has added absolutely nothing to our knowledge of women, all that has occurred is that preexisting knowledge and beliefs about women have been extended into the past, on behalf of Great Zimbabwe.

Laura Pate found that gender distinctions are not clear from archaeological data on the Moundbuilders, but gendered assumptions prevail. In a classic example, one study reports the carved shell spoons buried with women as “domestic implements,” while the ochre buried with men is described as a ceremonial pigment signifying membership in a male society. If the depositional pattern had been reversed, no doubt the spoons would have been “ceremonial wands” and the ochre interpreted as lipstick. More common even than these ethnocentric interpretations is total avoidance of the subject of gender, especially by archaeologists wishing to argue that Cahokia may have been an early state.

Lena Mortensen found that despite the powerful mythology of the masculine Viking, women clearly participated as full members of Viking political economy. Of course, the Vikings are not usually characterized as having a state, and there is no sense in which gender roles in ancient Scandinavia could be considered independently invented or unaffected by the rise of the European economic world system. This is clearly a case

in which traditional models of cultural evolution fail to capture the nature of organizational complexity.

Early Sumer has been one of the most popular loci for the instantiation of Marxist theory. Layla Al-Zubaidi’s examination of Sumerian women showed that their contribution to their state was almost exactly the same as that of men; though men are distinguished by degree of wealth power rather than absolute differences of opportunity or dominance. As with many early states, the visibility of women in public contexts is described as ritual or ceremonial, rather than as evidence of genuine authority, economic control, or political autonomy.

Sumerian women were acculturated into a world system that had as much to do with creation of the modern world system as with isolation from it. In fact, the use of naturalized gender categories in the service of a hegemonic political economy, may also be another “first,” for the Near East like writing, settled agriculture and cities. Nevertheless, Al-Zubaidi’s interrogation opens the tantalizing possibility that even in Mesopotamia, gender subordination may have become the norm sometime shortly *after* the establishment of class distinctions.

Looking at literature on the Moche of Peru, Cristina Alcalde found that the same preexisting assumptions guide most interpretations, despite the important position attributed to women in Moche art. Population movements and a lack of identification with the ancient Moche on the part of modern residents of the Moche homeland make cultural continuity doubtful, and the impact of celibate Catholic male missionaries was undoubtedly profound. Yet ethnohistory and recent ethnographies continue to be simplistically applied to support conclusions about gender hierarchies in the Peruvian past.

Gabriel Wrobel found the information or predynastic Egypt is more equivocal than expected. Easy assumptions about subordination are contradicted with the striking amount of legal and economic independence,

and even political influence afforded elite women. Instances of equal treatment of males and females in death results in the usual interpretation: kin organization. Wrobel's observations on the literature of burial data from the Predynastic period showed that although evidence for status distinctions skyrocketed in this era of rising bureaucracy, clear gender distinctions were vague. Many discussions are typified by the situation at the cemetery of Tarkhan, where the discovery that more grave goods appear with female than male interments has been met with the counter that status was indicated by the size of the burial hole.

Candice Lowe found data from Harappa on the numerous dressed and bejeweled female figurines in contrast to the few representations of naked men gets the predictable interpretation in the literature. There is no empirical way to be sure that the presence of decorative apparel indicates lower status than nudity; were the situation reversed, the dominance of men would certainly be asserted. More recent analyses of Harappan material considering skeletal evidence and evidence from specialist manufacturing make this picture even more unclear. Despite the difficulty of sexing juveniles, physical anthropological analysis of human remains from Harappa have been used to suggest more stress on female children, and the presence of more dental caries among women has been used to support the idea that women had a poorer diet. Of course the burial data may really reflect that more gracile children experienced greater skeletal stress, not at all an unlikely situation regardless of gender if children were treated equally (subadults are difficult to sex), and the simple fact that women's diet was different does not rule out the possibility that it was actually higher status, or of equal status to that of men.

The greatest surprise from the societies researched came from recent work in the Aegean. Association with the infamously misogynist Greeks caused us to anticipate a similarly unequal treatment of women by men among their ancestors. Sean Dougherty's

discussion of Minoan culture certainly encountered the western romance with Classical cultures. Recent work by Rehak (1998) on Bronze Age Aegean iconography indicates that women dominate representational art: women are shown more often than men, and they are shown larger.

In my own investigations I found that Maya women, invariably constructed as "keepers of tradition," are especially prone to being seen living in an ahistorical epic past. Evidence from their daily lives is mixed casually with evidence taken from the ethnohistoric documents of Spanish missionaries during the conquest and colonization of Maya lands by Europeans, and from present day women living in modern nation states. The bias of recorders who were not only altering the Maya system as rapidly as possible, but who had promised their god to eschew the wicked influence of women is almost never discussed, and modern practices are recorded as authentic only if they correspond to gender stereotypes. As with most investigations into the archaeology of gender, the absence of evidence is the major support for the dominance of men. For example, a recent article on male dominance among the Maya argues that the prevalence of men in Maya art indicates domination of the political order by men (Haviland, 1997, note that this has not been the typical interpretation of art that primarily represents women as in Harappa and the Aegean). One alternative that has been discussed is the possibility that representations of men in Maya art should be understood in terms of their intended audience, and that these representations may have been intentionally provocative if not erotic (Joyce, 2000). Such a construction, while not at all improbable, would certainly be the one given if most representations were female. Quantities of female representations are consistently written off as fertility symbols or goddesses "representing" rather than wielding power, or as "pin ups" intended for a dominant male gaze.

These are really only preliminary studies. Nevertheless, the failure to find unequivocal

support for the patterns of gender distinction long considered well-established suggests that further investigation would be worthwhile in a broader field. Other scholars have argued that capitalism commodifies women; Wolf argues that capitalism essentializes cultures. Capitalism also essentializes women in order to commodify them, but this is an historical process that situates women outside of history in the same way the world system creates underdeveloped peripheries. Like geographic peripheries, women are characterized as natural, traditional, fertile, uncivilized, dangerous, pacified with trinkets, and in need of government control. But women have used this

liminal status outside history as a source of power and a means of survival and resistance, even though we have been unable to reset the terms of the debate to allow for the possibility that women have history. Archaeologists, even many feminist archaeologists, continue to use the inadequate tools of cultural evolutionism to think with. But we can begin to reevaluate the data; we can begin to look at prehistory for evidence of other ways of framing gender and we can insist that essentialism is as wrong for gender studies as it is for cultural studies. Perhaps in this way we can begin to ask questions that will give more objective, more interesting, and more useful answers.

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