

There are a number of regulations controlling infanticide. In essence, they stipulate that infanticide is only permitted immediately after birth, before the mother-child bond is formed. For example, some Polynesians considered infanticide as murder only if the child had already been nursed from her mother's breast. Infanticide has to take place immediately after birth, since inhibitions in the mother grow with the exposure to her child. This was dramatically illustrated in the case of a birth which was documented by Grete and Wulf Schiefenhövel (1978) amongst the Eipo of highland Irian Jaya, a group of neolithic horticulturists who our research group contacted in 1974. Before giving birth, the woman had declared that she proposed to kill the child should it be a girl, since she had already girls. A girl was born and the mother prepared for infanticide, wrapping the child in fern leaves for abandonment and preparing a cord to bind the package, the usual form of disposal. But, due to the presence of Grete Schiefenhövel who was handling the camera, the woman did not proceed fast enough. The fists and little feet of the protesting baby struggling for its life pushed through the ferns, and the mother simply stood up and went away. She returned two hours later to unpack her infant. She cut the umbilical cord, cleaned the baby and accepted it. As if excusing herself for the change of mind she said: "It is such a strong baby."

There is little doubt that mothers and fathers in traditional societies love their children, and there are not the slightest indications that they do less so than parents in our societies. On the contrary, I have the feeling that, in our society with a very low birth rate, we become increasingly a society without warmth and love. It are the children that activate and evoke tender feelings, and they nurture by their presence our affiliative dispositions. In addition, the community breakdown and isolation of the nuclear family plays a significant role, as Polly Wiessner (personal communication) pointed out to me. What is particularly lacking is affection for other people's children, for children in general. In small individualized communities not only the own children are loved, but also the children of aunts, uncles, cousins, and other fellow community members.

Over the years, I have spent many months in Yanomami villages, and I was again and again deeply touched by their tenderness and affection for children. This attachment was also reflected in their wailing songs which I often heard in the early morning hours, when the chill of the night woke parents up, who had experienced such a loss.

Then parents and grandparents alike remembered their deceased children in their wailing songs. I documented some of them in 1989. With the help of the Yanomami informant Serowe, the co-author Marie Claude Mattei-Müller transcribed and translated the songs¹.

We would first like to present the song of the father. He started to sing spontaneously at dawn. His song refers to episodes in the child's life, how he had in vain tried to cure her under the influence of a native drug, which is customarily used to achieve a state of trance, and, interrupted by bouts of crying, he remembers the excursions that the child took with her mother to fish and to collect fruits. He complains: "Little girl, you abandoned your father, here I am totally alone," and referring to the mother he finally sings: "Oh mother, oh my poor mother." Such a touching statement indeed documents a deep affectional bond between the parents.

People certainly experience and use the same range of emotions. But since some cultures stress particular aspects of our emotional repertory, and since these most dramatically meet the eye, certain societies are portrayed in a very one-sided manner. The Yanomami have entered the literature for example as the "Fierce People." Careful observation of all activities in a culture, including everyday activities which find the interest of the ethologists, can correct one-sided views presented in some studies.

I would like to present the songs in this context to convey a balanced view. The tapes (original and copies) are stored within the "Humanethologisches Filmarchiv der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft" (Heeschen 1986).

Wailing Song of Yoreshiawë for the Death of His Little Daughter

Dawn 18.03.1989

The little girl the headman Yoreshiawë had with his second young wife, died approximately three months before. The child was approximately two or three years old.

¹ The signs used for the transcription correspond with the symbols and conventions of the International Phonetic Association as documented in 1949 in "The Principles of the International Phonetic Association" (University College, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT).

ā, ô, ē, ī indicates nasalization of these sounds

ɨ marks "short" /i/

ə is used as the symbol for the *Schwa*; it is pronounced like *a* in English *about*.