

Views of Primitive Peoples Concerning Abortion

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THE performance of abortion is a practice almost universal among the primitive tribes of the Pacific Islands and in most of them it is more or less legitimate, or at least often goes unpunished. In Fiji "midwifery is a distinct profession, exercised by women in all the towns, and they are said to be very skillful, performing operations which are among us considered as surgical. Abortion is prevalent, and nearly half of those conceived are supposed to be destroyed in this manner, usually by the command of the father, at whose instance the wife takes herbs which are known to produce this effect. If this does not succeed, the accoucheur is employed to strangle the child, and bring it forth dead."⁸¹ Thomson⁸² gives a rather extended notice of the practice, widespread in these islands: "The methods of the Fijians are, as in other countries, both toxic and mechanical. Certain herbs are taken with the intention of preventing conception, but the belief in their efficacy is not general. Some midwives, however, say that, when taken by nursing mothers with the view of preventing a second conception, they result in the death of the child. Another midwife—one of the class to which the professional abortionists belong—assured us that miscarriage resulted more frequently from distress of mind at the discovery of pregnancy than from the drugs that were taken. The abortives vary with the district and the practitioner, but they are all the leaves, bark or root of herbs, chewed or grated, and infused in water, and there is no reason why some of them should not be as effective as the medicines employed for the purpose by civilized peoples, though the mode of preparation is naturally more crude, and the doses more nauseous and copious than the extracts known to modern pharmacy. The 'wise women' appear to know that drugs which irritate the bowel have an indirect effect upon the pelvic viscera * * * Foremost among mechanical means is the *sau*, which is a skewer made of *losi/losi* wood, or a reed. It is used, of course, to pierce the membranes, and in unskillful hands it must be a death-dealing weapon.

Indeed, it must more often be fatal to the mother than to the fetus; for Taylor has pointed out that this mode of procuring abortion is only likely to succeed in the hands of persons who have an anatomical knowledge of the parts, and even the 'wise women' have shown themselves to be guiltless of even the most elementary anatomical knowledge. The various methods of inducing miscarriages by violence, such as are practiced by the Gilbert Islanders, who pound the abdomen of a pregnant woman with stones, or force the fetus downwards by winding a cord tightly about her body, are not resorted to by the Fijians, but the practice of *vakasilima* (lit., bathing), a manual operation which midwives are in the habit of performing with the object of alleviating the ailments of pregnancy, does, either by accident or design, sometimes result in a radical cure by causing the expulsion of the fetus. The patient is taken into the river or the sea, and squats waist-deep in the water with the 'wise woman,' who subjects her to a vaginal examination to enable her to ascertain the condition of the *os uteri*, and, through this digital diagnosis, to determine the particular herb to be used locally or internally. Some women assert that the examination under water is adopted for cleanliness only, but most seem to believe that there is virtue in the operation by itself without any subsequent herbal treatment. As there are many practitioners who devote themselves exclusively to this branch of practice, it is more than likely that it is often used as a pretext for an attempt to procure abortion, for a rough manipulation of the *os uteri* may excite uterine contraction, and so bring about expulsion of the fetus. Treatment by *vakasilima* is used in every form of disease in the abdominal region to which women are subject, and the manipulation of the fundus and vagina is so rough that the patient cries out with the pain."

Brown⁸³ also says that the natives of the islands of Polynesia administer a plant which they declare is an emmenagogue as well as an abortifacient, but in bringing about abortion the old women, who make it their business, use violent abdominal massage after giving the drug and the author ascribes success to this performance rather than to the medicine. The Papuan⁸⁴ women either use the sharp roots of a kind of grass, by means of which the intrauterine contents are destroyed and expelled or they pound on the distended abdomen until the life felt within the uterus is stilled. In Africa among the Wanyamwezi "drugs are employed to produce sterility; this and the practice of abortion account largely for the small size of the usual family. The doctors administer drugs for this purpose, but they keep them secret, and it is impossible to obtain any precise information concerning them; that they exist, and are effective, is a certainty."⁸⁵ "The red, barren clay from beneath a camp fire is used by White Mountain Apache⁸⁶ women to induce sterility." The Sinaugolo⁸⁷ woman, who considers

she has had enough children, consults a woman, skilled in the magic for the prevention of conception, but in Australia,⁸⁸ around the Carpentarian Gulf, a woman is proud of being with child. Indeed, it seems probable that this attitude towards childbearing is more common in primitive woman than in civilized woman.

It would be interesting to follow ethnological literature further and ascertain the devices to increase the fertility of his women, which primitive man adopts more frequently than abortifacients to destroy the life of the fetus. The story of the placenta and the umbilical cord is a chapter by itself. The problems of polygamy, these and many more connected with the account of the attitude of primitive men towards the preservation and propagation of the species might well engage the attention of obstetricians and pediatricists.

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