

It's a Boy!

[Anthro 212]

“Congratulations! It’s a boy!”...music to the ears of most fathers throughout history. Almost everyone wants boys! Girls, unfortunately, haven’t fared so well. Why the discrepancy? Aren’t boys the ones made out of ‘puppy dog tails’ whereas girls are made out of ‘sugar and spice and everything nice’? Ah, therein lies the rub, as Willy would say. We talk the talk, but we don’t walk the walk! To say the preference for boys is a ‘cultural’ factor doesn’t even come close to doing the topic justice, for the preference is basically worldwide, so at least a large part of the explanation must lie in something *bigger* than a specific culture—and so it does. It’s my thesis that it’s principally a result of economy. It’s certainly tied to agriculture, but it goes even further back than that.

It wasn’t too long ago, a mere 20,000 or so years ago (and tens of thousands of years prior to that), when there was only one economy—hunting & gathering—that’s what everyone did for a living, and there, right from that earliest economy, the emphasis was already on the males. Not to downplay the importance of females (without them, no society), but males were already necessary in numbers, not for procreation, but because they were both the providers and the defenders—and males provided the leadership [*‘Sexist!’ you might say, but there was actually a logical reason for that*].

Around 10,000 BC, the Neolithic began, and it was in this chapter of Man’s story that the horticulture of the Mesolithic (which was viewed as a secondary job performed by women) turned into full-fledged agriculture (which was viewed as the primary job...now taken over by males). This new type of economy was work intensive; it demanded heavy labor in the fields, and the more the better—more males needed! And, if we look at which societies around the world today have the biggest birth rates and highest relative population densities, they’re all agricultural. It’s something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Agriculture demands more labor, but it sustains bigger populations, which in turn provide more male workers. As a result of this, then, agricultural societies, more than any other, put a heavy premium on the birth of male children. Now, with that as the underlying factor, other resulting, secondary, factors appear. For example, approximately 80% of the world’s societies are patrilineal, wherein descent is traced through the male side of the family. Thus we have the often-voiced idea that ‘a son is needed to carry on the family name.’

And, there’s the rather curious phenomenon involving wealth exchanges as a part of marriage. In primitive societies, the ‘bride price’ is the more common (i.e., where wealth is given by the prospective groom to the girl’s family), but in civilized societies, based on agriculture, the ‘dowry’ is the more common custom (i.e., where the wealth goes to the groom from the girl or her parents)...as if the male has to be ‘enticed’ into the bargain and the female has to be suitably ‘packaged’ to be gotten rid of! Plus, for the girls’ families, those dowries can be very expensive and draining...especially on families with multiple daughters [*my neighbor, for example, has five daughters and no sons—ouch!*]. Thus, there’s an even more obvious economic reason for the preference of sons over daughters.

Then there are such things as perhaps not having to worry so much about sons as daughters—safety, chastity [*double standard, I know!*], etc. All in all, though, having two sons and a daughter, myself, from a raising

