

Women's Religious Experience In Prehistoric And Small Scale Societies¹

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Women's religious lives in contemporary state-based cultures seem to exist on the periphery of centralised religions headed by male clergies and male defined institutions and rituals. This was not always so for women. For over 97% of our history as human beings, women and men have participated fully in the religious lives of their communities, each in their own clearly defined spheres. Drawing on examples from women-focused anthropology and evidence from ancient history, this essay explores some aspects of women's religious lives in prehistoric and contemporary small-scale cultures, previously hidden from Western eyes by assumptions and biases which, until recently, informed anthropological investigations.

Prehistoric cultures can only be directly known to us through their artefact remains, and various theoretical methods have evolved since the beginning of archaeology to explain the meaning of these artefacts. Since the middle of the twentieth century, archaeologists have also engaged with contemporary anthropologists in order to understand prehistoric cultures. With a cautious recognition that many of today's remaining village and small scale cultures seem to resemble what we know of prehistoric cultures, archaeology and anthropology now work together to create plausible descriptions of the societies stretching back to the beginning of human culture (Gero & Conkey, 1991:13; Spector, 1993).

Understanding the religion practised by any of these prehistoric cultures is problematic, for often the most sacred ideas attract taboos against physical or artistic representation. For example, in the entirety of African religious iconography, John Mbiti could not find one instance in which an icon represented a high deity (Mbiti, 1969:71). Therefore, interpreting religion directly from artefacts alone can be misleading, and the religions of today's comparative cultures are drawn on for possible explanations of the belief systems of cultures long extinct. To understand the religious life of prehistoric women, the same principles can be utilized, that is, reading back and forth between the prehistoric artefact assembly and today's women living a similar lifestyle. The following brief discussion of women in some of these contemporary cultures² and their religious experience, blends together past and present to form a picture of women's lives and religion in cultures very different from our own.

Our species, Homo Sapiens, has been around for about 400,000 years, with Homo Sapiens Sapiens appearing around 100,000 BCE (Fagan, 2001:76; Wenke, 1990:136-195).³ For over 97.5% of these 400,000 years, people lived as foragers, or hunter-gatherers, organised into egalitarian bands or more structured tribes (with

chiefs), and moved around to follow the seasons, the wild plants, and the wild animals they gathered and hunted (Wenke, 1990:136-195). They no doubt had a varied tool kit for hunting, trapping, and preparing animals, and for collecting wild foods. Of these tools, only the stone ones remain, and this period in our history has come to be known as the Old Stone Age, or the Paleolithic. Some people may have lived more settled lives, preferring to camp more or less permanently in richer environments, where plants, fish, and animals were plentiful year-round. But the nomadic, forager life style seemed to be the most widespread, and our predecessors, including *Homo Erectus* before us, lived like that for about 2 million years (Fagan, 2001:78).

The archaeological record indicates that about 10,000 years ago, small groups of people began to settle in permanent villages in the Near and Middle East to begin what we now call the Neolithic period, or the New Stone Age. This period is characterised by deliberate horticulture (gardening) and agriculture (crop farming), with the development of domesticated plants and animals, making nomadic wandering unnecessary (Ehrenberg, 1989:77-107; Fagan, 2001:252-269; Wenke, 1990:225-251). Whether this was an improvement or not could be debated considering the extra work involved in farming and dependency on reliable rainfall. As Margaret Ehrenberg concluded, "agriculture does not necessarily make life any better" (1989:84).

For the first few thousand years, only a tiny percentage of the world's population lived this Neolithic lifestyle, while the rest continued foraging, supported by customs and beliefs refined over millennia of practice. Today, less than 1% of human beings, in fact about 0.003% or 3 one thousandths of the total human population, lives a traditional forager lifestyle (Ehrenberg, 1989:50). Over 99% of us live in cities and villages supported by industrialisation and centralised authorities. In many parts of the world, a Neolithic-like lifestyle is still maintained, but increasingly it is made difficult by global change, forcing villagers to serve the needs of industrialised centres rather than retain their self-sufficiency.

The term, Neolithic, is somewhat misleading, as it implies, again, that life is characterised by the use of stone tools, as opposed to tools made from other materials. While Neolithic people did retain and refine their Paleolithic tool kit and develop stone ploughs and tree-clearing axes, their lives differed profoundly from their Paleolithic forebears and were characterised by permanent village life, hard work in the fields, tending of penned animals, the need for food storage, the manufacturing of tools, textiles, and other artefacts, the need for increased social organisation, new building and sanitation skills and knowledge, increase in birth rate and subsequent population, increase in disease, and a new regard for climate and natural phenomena (Ehrenberg, 1989:85-90; Fagan, 2001:252-269; Wenke, 1990:261-267). Their whole lives, not just modifications to their tool kit, were new, and a different understanding of life demanded changes to ritual, religious concepts, and social culture as well.

What did these changes mean for women, and in particular, for their religious experience and understanding?

Women in forager cultures have commonly been characterised as the gatherers. While the men are away on hunting expeditions, women stay close to the camp, exploring the immediate surroundings with their children at their sides and on their backs, and gathering honey and plant products to augment the meat their men bring home. The male contribution to society, until recently, has been deemed central, and men were assumed to be in charge of the political, religious, and social life of the community. Anthropologists of the past, mainly male, unthinkingly adopted these assumptions, and their studies are based on interaction largely with male members of today's small-scale societies. Any questions regarding female experience were directed to the men, assumed to be in charge (Bacigalupo, 1996:58-59; Bell, 1987:83-85; 1993:24-25, 29, 229-254; 1994:40-42; Franzmann, 2000:72; Leacock, 1978:249-253), and most often, women's lives were largely ignored (Bacigalupo, 1996:58; Paper, 1994:90).

Today, this stereotypical view has been challenged by the observations of anthropologists, many of them women, for example Bacigalupo (1996), Bell (1987; 1993; 1994), Mernissi (1988), Pearson (1996), Spector (1993), and Tewari (1982). They have confirmed that small-scale, forager life is deeply divided by sex, but not necessarily in the hierarchical way once unquestioned, which placed women's activities subordinate to those of men. What is left of traditional Australian Aboriginal culture demonstrates that women still have certain tasks, responsibilities, and rituals separate from the men, who have their own tasks, responsibilities, and rituals. While the group as a whole shares other responsibilities, religious beliefs and rituals, those which are exclusive to each sex are not shared with the opposite sex. Thus male Aborigines in a traditional society would not be able to answer questions about subjects exclusive to women; neither would the women be able to talk to a male anthropologist, nor even a female anthropologist if they worried that she might tell a man — her husband or supervisor, perhaps. Thus women's rituals and beliefs, and much of men's too, are closed off to the inquiring western mind (Bell, 1987; 1993:26-34, 229-254; 1994). Assumptions about the lives of the women in these cultures are formed from inadequate information and the biases of the inquirer.

For a landmark discussion of this problem in Anthropology, see Eleanor Leacock (1978). Although she does not specifically deal with women's religious experience, her insights into biases in anthropological studies can be easily applied to accounts of women and religion in small-scale societies. See also Diane Bell's chapter on "The Problem of Women" (Bell, 1993:229-254), in which she discusses in detail the effect of male-bias in Anthropology, particularly with regard to Australian desert Aboriginal women's religious lives.

The observations of female anthropologists demonstrate that women in small-scale cultures, rather than being subordinate to and dependent on men, tend to live lives quite independently of men, or, rather, interdependently with them.⁴ Within each small-scale culture co-exists two major and, often, equal or autonomous cultures (Bell, 1993:23; Leacock, 1978:248). In hierarchical, state-based societies, the 'equal but different' philosophy often keeps women subordinate to men and restricted to domestic life, but in small-scale societies,

women's contributions to communal religious and material life stand more equally alongside the different contributions of men.⁵ A male anthropologist, no matter how liberated in his thinking, will not be able to penetrate the religious world of women in these societies, and only recently have female anthropologists recognised that the male experience is not the norm, but only half the story.

We are now discovering that the forager life is not dominated by the search for meat, with women left to do the cooking, cleaning up, and childbearing, while men perform the prestigious activity of hunting (Ehrenberg, 1989:41). Archaeological examination of prehistoric habitation sites indicates that the dominant part of the diet consisted of small animals and plants. A look at contemporary small-scale societies reveals that women most often spend their foraging time hunting small animals, gathering plant foods, and keeping an eye out for tracks and signs of larger animal life, of which they inform the men. They do not sit waiting for men to 'bring home the bacon.' Without the 'bacon,' they can eat very well, and without the reconnaissance of women, the men sometimes have a hard time finding the meat. A discussion of the lives of prehistoric and small-scale women, from the point of view of one feminist archaeologist, can be found in Ehrenberg (1989:41-76).

While prehistoric women probably hunted small animals, it may be true that men tended to hunt the large game, for which they needed physical strength and the freedom to move away from the camp, perhaps for several days. Rituals needed for the hunt, and spiritual realities expressed through large game animals are often the subject of men's religious experience. The European Paleolithic paintings of animals and hunting incidents which suggest an element of the supernatural seem to feature men in the few instances where human figures suggest rituals or religious context, such as the famous 'shaman' with bird totem from the Lascaux cave, and the therianthrope horned figure, the 'sorcerer,' from the Trois Frères cave (Bahn & Vertut, 1997:165-166, 180-181, Figs. 10.34, 10.35, 11.8). In today's African small-scale societies, men, rather than women, tend to perform ritual sacrifices, as tending large animals still seems to be done by men.⁶ However, archaeologist, Margaret Conkey considers it possible that in Paleolithic times, women without children could have been involved in game drives taking several days (Conkey, 1991:79), but she does not add that, in between hunts, men might have gone off with a digging stick, prepared animal hides, or looked after children while the women went foraging. Biases could be at work here, privileging 'traditional' male occupations over female ones.

Naturally women's ritual activities will concern their various life experiences. They take part in communal rituals with men and children, and share in common beliefs of the world of spirits and ancestors, and are present at sacrifices and take their designated parts in ritual dances (Evans-Pritchard, 1956; Lienhardt, 1961). But they also perform religious actions that men do not, many outside the traditional female world of childbirth.

Australian Aboriginal women's rituals focus on the dreaming, kinship, and the land in different ways to men's rituals. Aboriginal women inherit some land responsibilities through their mother's lineage (Bell, 1987:86). Through certain

ceremonies they nurture land, cure illness, resolve conflict, restore social harmony, and manage emotions (Bell, 1987:85-86; 1993). Rituals around menarche and menstruation are not for purposes of protection from pollution, but are the opportunities for women to fast and practice their spiritual disciplines (Bell, 1987:95)⁷

The *Mapuche* women of South America function as *Machis*, or shamans (Bacigalupo, 1996:72), as do women in many small-scale societies around the world. Women are often understood to be more 'spiritual' than men, closer to the spirit world, more able to mediate between the spirit world and the community (King, 1987:164-174; Leacock, 1978:251). They use their talents to enter trances and 'bring back' answers to many questions from healing to conflict resolution.

For the *Mapuche* women, their service as shamans came largely as a result of the development of agriculture brought by the Spanish. The influence of the Spanish caused the men to assume a more dominant role and participate more in the political rather than religious life of the community (Bacigalupo, 1996:64-65, 68, 72, 95-100). With a cultural taboo against *Machis* being involved in politics (Bacigalupo, 1996:71), religious life fell to the women. Interestingly, prior to the Spanish, most male *Machis* were transvestite males (Bacigalupo, 1996:95-100), indicating that the *Mapuches* conceived the nature of shamanic activity as female, rather than male, even though the males performed it at that time.

The *Mapuche* culture provides a living example of what may have happened to prehistoric women's religious experience for those communities which shifted from a forager to a Neolithic lifestyle, for the *Mapuche* women's traditional knowledge of plants became central to new religious developments (Bacigalupo, 1996:63, 100-104). Women in small-scale, forager societies tend to develop skills in food gathering, plant recognition, food and medicine preparation, and the understanding of the seasonal cycles of the many medicinal and food plants in their territory. While men can be shamans as well, women often combine their knowledge of plants with their shamanic skills, and function as the group's healers. In the transition from male to female *Machis*, the "Machis stop being shamans and become shaman/healers" as agriculture becomes important (Bacigalupo, 2002:214). This knowledge of plants becomes pivotal in the transition from forager to village life (Ehrenberg, 1989:77-90).

The *Mapuches* adopted agriculture from the Spanish, and the members of the community most suited to the new tasks were the women, who already had an in-depth knowledge of plant behaviour. Women assumed the role of farmers, developing accompanying rituals suited to the new need for crop fertility. A new deity emerged, *Ngüenechen* (Bacigalupo, 1996:100), and this new deity, a composite male/female divinity, governed the world of agricultural fertility. Women developed rituals and beliefs around this deity, while the men increasingly concerned themselves with outside activities as wage earners in the broader Chilean community (Bacigalupo, 1996:99). Male participation in village life waned. Previously concerned with hunting and warfare, they now leave the community to work (Bacigalupo, 1996:63, 99), and women remain in the community, taking responsibility for religious and agricultural life.

Until recently, assumptions have often been that men dominated the hunter-gatherer life and carried their superior position into the Neolithic world, where their decisions and leadership brought about village life (Ehrenberg, 1989:77). But, today observation of communities, such as the *Mapuche* and contemporary remnants of traditional farming cultures in North America and Africa, indicates that women, along with their skills as plant gatherers, provided the necessary knowledge for the development of Neolithic life. Hunting gradually became less important, while the knowledge of plant life and its seasonal cycle dominated the daily routine.

Some hints about women's Neolithic religious and practical responsibilities in the realm of agriculture shine through the patriarchal restrictions to women's lives in Ancient Greece (Dillon, 2002a). Several women-only festivals of Ancient Greece focused on the fertility of the fields as well as women's fertility, allowing women the freedom to participate in festivals of up to three days, as in the case of the Thesmophoria (Dillon, 2002a:110). Although men had the responsibility for working the land (Dillon, 2002a:297), women took the ritual responsibility for ensuring its fertility through "timeless rituals harking back to the first days of agriculture" (Dillon, 2002a:300), implying that Greek women derived their religious freedoms from their Neolithic ancestral sisters. This ancient connection to Neolithic times could explain why, "in Athenian culture where women could not even own a loaf of bread, they had enormous freedom, autonomy, and responsibility in Greek religious life" (Dillon, 2002b).

In the development to a Neolithic life, whether 10,000 years ago or today, animals become domesticated, and often men assume responsibility for them, having acquired an intimate knowledge of animal behaviour from their hunter forebears. This tendency can still be observed in African small-scale cattle cultures, such as the Sudanese Dinka and Nuer, in which the men are primarily responsible for cattle and other herd animals, while women take responsibility for horticulture (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; 1955; 1956; 1965; Lienhardt, 1961). The economic shift from foraging to Neolithic settled agriculture necessitates a change in religious belief and ritual. The moment of capture and slaying of the hunted animal transforms into the ritual animal sacrifice, often performed at a permanent outdoor shrine in the village. Animal sacrifice is still performed in African, Indian, and Southeast Asian village communities, among others, and the newly formed state-based cultures of the ancient Near and Middle East carried animal cults and sacrifice from their earlier village practices.

Agriculture, as a new or severely modified practice, requires new beliefs and deities, as in the example of *Mapuche* culture, or a reassignment of earlier plant spirits. These new or transformed deities in the Neolithic probably functioned largely through the ministrations of women, and this may be one of the explanations for the thousands of female figurines which have been found in most Near and Middle Eastern Neolithic cultures, and are still used today, especially in the domestic rites and agricultural rituals of India (Pearson, 1996:86, 157).

Village life in today's India provides an analogy to Neolithic life. Despite the hierarchical, patriarchal, and centralised nature of Indian society today, these

villages still retain much of the self-sufficiency of the typical Neolithic village. The villagers grow their own food, stocking their markets with the goods produced within their own region. Of course this is changing, but the farmers of India still sustain the entire country in most of its food requirements. Many village festivals centre on seasonal ceremonies. The most important one in Southern India, the harvest festival, honours several of the many versions of their Great Goddess, Devī, using various images such as figurines and wall designs (Entwistle, 1984; Minturn, 1993:191). Also included in village ritual, are ceremonies focused on goddesses of disease, such as Sanjī (Minturn, 1993:190-191) and Chotī Mātā (Sax, 1994:199), other forms of Devī. In both Northern and Southern India, Durgā, the warrior and saviour version of Devī, is honoured as well. The most significant annual or, in some cases, semi-annual festival of Northern India, the Durgā pūjā, called the Navarātri (nine nights of Durgā), takes place over nine days (Marriott, 1955:200-201; Pearson, 1996:86-87) under the names of various local goddesses, besides Durgā, such as Nandā (Sax, 1994:180), Sanjī (Minturn, 1993:190), Sājhī (Entwistle, 1984:43-44), and Nauratā (Entwistle, 1984:53). Durgā is honoured not only as the warrior saviour, but also the daughter, who marries outside the home, leaving her mother and sisters behind. These ceremonies directed at Durgā as daughter and sister are performed by the women of the household, and speak of the sadness of women, separated from each other by exogamy, the custom of marrying out of the family, often into a family of strangers (Sax, 1994:180). Anyone who has seen the movie *Bandit Queen* might remember that Phūlan Devī represented the savior goddess, Durgā, to the local villagers.⁶ This is one of the reasons why, despite the murder charges against her, she held a parliamentary seat until her death in 2001.

Many ceremonies honouring the many-faceted Indian goddess are performed in the home by the women of the household. Anyone who has read Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) cannot help but be impressed by his respectful characterisation of the traditional Indian woman throughout the text, performing her daily household pūjā. Women all over India today make daily and seasonal offerings to the goddess, as well as other deities, male and animal, within their own home shrines. Their autonomy in religious life, while they live within the confines of patriarchy, resembles in many ways that of the women of Ancient Greece.

As in rural India, disease would have been an important focus for religious ritual in Neolithic cultures. The typical disease goddesses to whom people make offerings in India bring typhoid, cholera, smallpox, and plague. Of course typhoid and cholera can be and are caused by water pollution by human as well as animal activity, but smallpox in particular is a disease restricted to the lives of people who live with animals. It is widely known that the foragers of North and South America and Australia, not having lived in close proximity to animals, had no resistance to animal diseases, and suffered extreme decimation through smallpox.⁸

The typical Middle Eastern Neolithic village included animal stables, sometimes within the walled courtyards of houses, exposing the human inhabitants to animal-borne diseases. Women, as the traditional healers, would have developed

treatments and healing rituals to combat these diseases. Again, if healing is seen to be often women's role, those spirits associated with disease can often be conceived as female, as in the Indian example. In Ancient Egypt, an historic centralised culture directly arising from Neolithic village culture, Isis was the goddess whom people approached for healing, either through incubation of dreams in the Isis temple, or through offerings made at her many shrines (Watterson, 1984:89-131). Isis, as the divine mother, healer, and saviour (Bleeker, 1963; 1973:45) was served in her shrines by priestesses and often received the attentions and offerings of women, for they were the members of the community most concerned with family life, health, and children, as was Isis. For conception, childbirth, and marital happiness, Ancient Egyptian women often appealed to Hathor, and they brought votive-offerings to her shrines (Baines, 1991:180; Pinch, 1993:199-225).

Women, of course, whether from small-scale, village, or state-based cultures, function as mothers and life-bringers. Their ability to conceive and bring life into the world is often invested with supernatural or magical meaning. Their openness to the world of spirits and spiritual power through their ability to give life often gives them special status in the community where such powers are used to contact the spirit world. But for Neolithic women in particular, this motherhood came to have a deadly side.

Cemetery excavations of Neolithic sites often tell a tale of misery and suffering for these women, for they show an average child mortality rate of 40% (Chamberlain, 1997:1), and these children, if newborns, often took their mothers with them to the grave. Increased food supply, a settled life, and hard labour in the fields exacerbated the danger always present in childbirth. Neolithic or village women have many more children than nomadic women (Ehrenberg, 1989:89). The reasons are not entirely clear, but perhaps the periodic scarcities and wanderings of the nomadic life make conception harder to sustain. Neolithic women probably responded with an increase in the magic and ritual surrounding childbirth, caused by the greater need to ward off danger, and protect the mother and unborn child. Also, having more children was highly desired, as these children became free labour, serving the prodigious work demands of settled, agricultural life. The same need applies in today's village cultures.

In contemporary small-scale cultures, ritual activity for women either desiring a pregnancy, wishing for a child of a particular sex, or for women already pregnant and needing protection for their own and their child's health often include the use of small figurines. Hung around the neck as protective amulets, slept with at night, or displayed in the home during the time of conception or pregnancy, these figurines augment their prayers to the deities of childbirth and pregnancy (Ucko, 1962:420-6; 1968:45-7). During Egypt's historic period, this deity could be the male god Bes, the hippopotamus goddess Taweret, or the cow goddess, Hathor. The figurines of these deities sometimes followed the women into their graves (Baines, 1991:180-181; Frankfurter, 1998:134; Pinch, 1993:199-233). Like the religious traditions of Ancient Greece, these traditions often have their roots in Neolithic rituals, and some of the Egyptian grave figurines, and figurines from other Neolithic cultures, probably functioned in this way or were votive offerings

to protective deities and spirits, while others may have been associated with agricultural fertility, as were the figurines of Demeter in Ancient Greece (Dillon, 2002a:126). The even more ancient figurines of the Paleolithic, dating to c22,000 BCE, might also be linked to women's activities, as they tend to be found in habitation contexts (Ehrenberg, 1989:67), as are the majority of Neolithic figurines (Ucko, 1962; 1968), as well as those of contemporary India.

This brief overview of women's lives and religious concerns from the earliest Paleolithic times, through the Neolithic and Ancient cultures, into contemporary small-scale and village cultures, demonstrates that women's lives and religious focus are not solely restricted to the traditional roles of women as child-bearers, although certainly this role and accompanying rituals are vital to them. Women as shamans, healers, land custodians, farmers, and family and group nurturers dictate that they develop beliefs and rituals specific to their talents and responsibilities. Their participation in spiritual disciplines, perhaps during menstruation or at the time of menarche, indicates recognition of their spiritual as well as child-bearing potential.

Although not the subject of this discussion, the question of how women's social and political status declined with the rise of patriarchal, state-based cultures naturally arises. Ehrenberg (1989:99-107) links it to the development of plough agriculture and subsequent increase of labour and specialisation, with men taking up ploughing, Leacock (1978:254) attributes the change to the development of trade and specialisations which "undermine[d] individual control and personal autonomy," creating dependence on outside relations conducted by men. For contemporary small-scale cultures, contact with male-dominated Western forces and ideas privileged males over females and upset the gender balance (Bell, 1993:249-250; Leacock, 1978:253-255). Whatever the reasons, the change for women is symbolised in myths of the defeat of a primeval goddess, such as Tiamat and Gaia, with the subsequent 'civilising' takeover of male-dominated structures under deities such as Marduk and Zeus (Relke, 1999:11-22), corresponding to a decrease in women's political and social status in ancient societies.

In ancient, male-dominated societies, such as Greece, however, women's diminished freedoms did not necessarily extend to religious participation. Similarly, in today's hierarchical societies, having descended from these ancient cultures, religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism still display independent spheres of religious activity for men and women, often with women undertaking their celebrations and observances within the domestic sphere, while the men dominate religious life in the churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples (Franzmann, 2000:114-125). In societies, whether state-based, village, or small-scale, where male activity is privileged, women's activity becomes undervalued, and for the most part, women's activities in today's official religious systems are deemed peripheral and secondary to men's (Franzmann, 2000:71-83). But in both hierarchical and more egalitarian societies, when women are placed at the centre (Franzmann, 2000:105-139), and when a woman's life is examined "as she perceives it" (Bell, 1993:229), women still dominate the home and village shrines, functioning as shamans, healers, visionaries, diviners, and

prophets for their communities, perhaps connecting by a fine thread through time with their ancestral Paleolithic and Neolithic foremothers.

Endnotes

1. In 1997 I was employed to research women's religious lives for a new work on women and religion (Franzmann, 2000). As I explored women in various world religions, I found that conventional scholarship focusing on religious scriptures and official structures rarely mentioned women's experience. But when I began to investigate women's accounts of their own experience and reports from female anthropologists, a whole, unknown world opened up before me. I realised that if women's access to and participation in the mosque, synagogue, temple, or church is restricted or prohibited, this does not stop women from leading very busy and satisfying religious lives. I soon came to the conclusion that conventional scholarship religion was, at best, only half finished.

My own work on the Neolithic figurines of Mesopotamia (Relke, 1997) and Egypt (Relke 2000) led me to apply my discoveries to the women in both prehistory and contemporary pre-industrial small scale societies. This article on the religious lives of these women arose from that study.

2. "in so far as social processes of the precolonial world can be reconstructed" (Leacock, 1978:248).

3. Reliable information on human origins can be found in any up-to-date textbook on the subject, for example Fagan (2001) and Wenke (1990).

4. European contact with indigenous societies, whether in Africa, the Americas, Australia, or elsewhere in the world, irrevocably changed these cultures and gender relations within them (Bell, 1993:17, 23; Leacock, 1978). I refer here to what we can know about small-scale cultures in their pre-contact forms, for it is these forms, constructed by anthropologists and archaeologists, which are used to illuminate similar prehistoric societies. Any excellent example of this reconstruction can be found in Spector (1993).

5. Janet Spector (1993), through her archaeological methodology, transformed what conventional archaeology categorises as a domestic maintenance tool (an awl) into a vehicle for female status equal to that achieved by the men of the community through their activities. Augmenting standard archaeological practice with material from ethnography and ethnohistorical sources, she brought to life a part of the ritual life of the women of a disused Aboriginal Dakota village.

6. The work of Evans-Pritchard (Evans-Pritchard, 1956) on the Sudanese Nuer and Lienhardt (Lienhardt, 1961) on the Sudanese Dinka provide excellent detail on the role of men in the sacrificial life of their communities.

7. For an in depth view of desert Australian Aboriginal women's lives and religious experience, despite the prohibition on the discussion of secret matters, see Bell's monograph (1993).

8. This film gives an easily accessible glimpse of some aspects of women's lives today in rural India.

9. An ample amount of information on the effects of smallpox and other diseases brought to indigenous peoples by Europeans can be found on the Internet. However, a reliable source of information on the effects of smallpox on indigenous Australians can be found in Judy Campbell's recent book on the subject (Campbell, 2002). The

catastrophic effects of introduced diseases on North American natives are explained by David Meltzer (1992).

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