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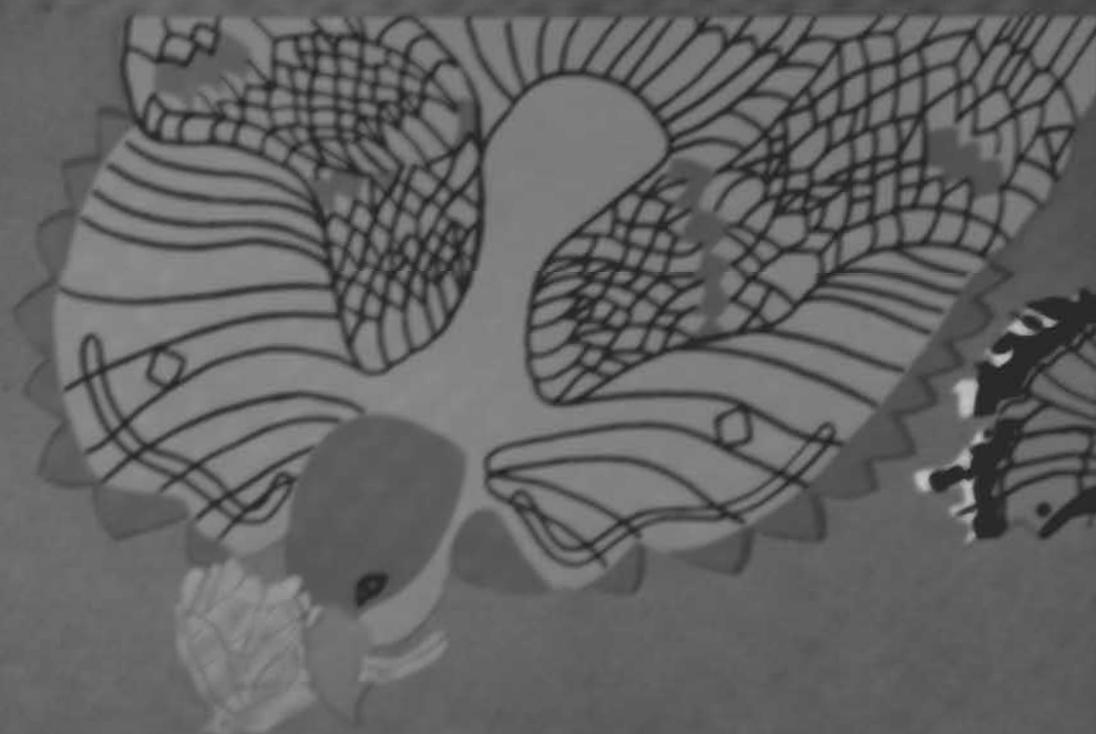
INSIDE!
AN 8-PAGE
ACCESS CATALOGUE
FOR CITY DWELLERS

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EVELYN REED REVIEWED

by Elizabeth Rupert

I have always been fascinated by the limitless possibilities open to human beings that are implied by the great diversity of cultures our world has seen. When I came to study anthropology formally, however, this vision of possibility was clouded by the culture-bound, paternalistic attitudes which so often impede our understanding of other cultures. In particular, the whole history, experience, and specialized activity of the female half of populations is often either down-graded or considered irrelevant to the understanding of human culture, or, as it is commonly called, "man and all his works". Like a lover that one adores but simply cannot get through to, anthropology fascinates and frustrates me at the same time.

When I got the chance, then, to interview the author of *Women's Evolution*, the most logically consistent and clear analysis of social evolution I have so far been privileged to read, I couldn't believe my luck. How had Evelyn Reed managed to learn so much about a discipline without incorporating the limits of its world view into her own thinking?

Sitting 22 storeys above the beach where Indians used to build houses 22-storeys long, she talked to Josie and me about it:

... thought-control — yes... I think that of all the disciplines that have this element of thought-control, anthropology is the worst — well, maybe psychology. But let's remember that the founding anthropologists, the ones I follow in their methodology because they were evolutionists — they discovered the matriarchy and a whole series of things — they were not Ph.D.'s, but they founded the science.... I've had so many young anthropologists, the ones who haven't written books, say, "Well, I went through four years, or whatever, and I just couldn't make sense out of it, I just didn't understand. It was interesting descriptive material, but I didn't know what it was all about. What is its ultimate meaning?"

Well, I asked a question, and nobody knew the answer. That's the way all science comes about. That's the way

Darwin got started; he asked some questions and tried to find the answers, and he did find a number of answers. So I tell this to people because I think the young women especially, when they ask questions, should not be led into glib answers by somebody who has pre-manufactured them, but pursue their own studies. And you know, women have got a lot of questions. They just have to become aware of the fact that they should first ask them and then, if they don't find adequate answers, go and pursue it. And don't wait for the universities to help out. You can get a lot from the universities, of course, but it's all strictly delimited. You go this far and no further. So proceed on your own. Be pioneers.

Evelyn began her own pioneering in the Royal Anthropological Institute in London, where she happened to be at the time, and ended up twenty years later with a 500-page book that is being translated into several languages.

... I found evidence, a lot of it, that others had seen everywhere — sometimes you see something everywhere but you don't close in on it, so to speak. I had closed in on it. Well, ordinarily, if you answer a question, you say, "Well, that's it."

*But in the course of my studies, I began to see a whole lot of other things, that it was absolutely true that there had been a matriclan system of social organization, it was absolutely true that it was collectivist — and what had happened to anthropology, what had happened to this science that could tell us so much about our prehistory and especially about women, the history of women and their great achievements? So I proceeded to answer every question that came up in my mind that hadn't yet been answered, and some were very difficult. I knew then I was going to write a book, but I didn't think it was going to be published. I thought, "Well, I'll suffer the same fate as Robert Briffault (author of *The Mothers*) — shunted aside and de facto suppressed. They won't put your book in the universities or the libraries and it won't sell and you won't get any reviews."*

But I thought, "That's OK. This has happened to other people and some day someone will come along and find my manuscript and figure, 'That's interesting, we'll publish it' " — you know, a more enlightened time. Well, I finished my first draft about the time the Women's Liberation Movement broke.

The women's movement not only helped to create a climate for the book's reception considerably "more enlightened" than that of the '50's when Evelyn

began her work, but it also influenced the writing itself. She no longer had to work in isolation.

... the last two drafts were influenced by everything I was learning in moving around among the women, 'cause they were asking questions, so I could emphasize that point, build up other points, and so on, make adjustments to things I might have overlooked. And, of course, there's a lot left out, though it's already a very big book, but I figure the scholars that come along after me will pick it up. There's enough material there to start a dozen new books.

There is, indeed. When you set out to trace the evolution of social organization from the beginnings of humanization to the advent of "The Father-Family, Private Property and the State" (to paraphrase Engels), a million and a half years later, you amass a fair amount of material.

Trying to give you an idea of what all this material covers involves simplifying to the point of distortion. Just keep in mind that all the problems raised by such simplifications are dealt with fully in the book itself.

Evelyn Reed begins her study with the reasonable, but anthropologically quite heretical, premise that the survival needs of mothers and infants exert much more evolutionary pressure than the needs of males, very few of whom need survive to keep reproduction swinging along at top capacity. An animal species can afford male competitiveness and aggression as these traits serve to kill off weaker males or keep them from gaining access to females, thus strengthening the species.

Humanization, however, required a de-emphasis of brute strength in favour of the development of creative, intellectual, and social capabilities. This meant replacing rigid instinct with adaptable learning, which in turn meant a long lead time between birth and maturity. Creatures that remain helpless a long time can only survive if the adults co-operate in their nurturing, training, and protection.

The traits of nurturing, protecting, and sharing food that occur, among mammals, almost exclusively in females, had to be developed in the whole population. Though Reed is writing about social rather than biological processes and doesn't go into it, I assume that the kind of selective breeding necessary for this development was based on the gradual replacement of instinct by female decision-making. Instead of instinctively accepting the winner in a fight for her charms, a female could now ignore both brawny

combatants and go off with some skinny youth better adapted to loving than to fighting.

However it came about, the animal band of females and young, with a few combative males hanging around its edges, was replaced by a co-operative group of females and males all nurturing the young and each other. This did not mean, of course, that nurturance replaced aggression. Human beings seem to grow by adding new on top of old — we don't replace the old until it has completely lost its function. Aggression was still fairly useful for hunting animals and protecting the group. It just had to be controlled. Reed theorizes that those twin pillars of ancient society, totem and taboo, were constraints imposed by the women upon male competitiveness and sexual aggression. Under their aegis, men were sworn to protect and support all members of their totem, or clan, and all its women were sexually taboo to them. These two "sacred" rules removed all competition for food and mates from within the group that had to live, work, and raise children together.

The so-called matriarchies, as Reed points out, were also fratriarchies — brotherhoods of men. Society was organized into matriclans consisting of perhaps hundreds of people, all of whom, in a particular generation, considered themselves to be brothers and sisters. Like nation states today, each was completely autonomous except for any alliances it could manage to make with "stranger" clans. Their kinship terms were mother, son, daughter, mother's brother, mother's sister, mother's mother, and so on, all centring

on motherhood. There were no terms recognizing fatherhood.

In this scheme of things there were, in effect, no fathers. Mothers' lovers were strangers, not part of the family. Reed traces the very long evolution from this kind of matriclan through the matri-family (in which there were husbands but still no fathers — children belonged exclusively to the mother and her kinfolk) and the extended family (which recognized bilateral kinship) to the father-family (in which name, rank and material goods came down through the father's line). This evolution paralleled productive and technical advances in which, until the final stage, women were the prime movers. Out of the problems imposed by their work, they invented and produced almost everything except advances in weaponry. The men, then as now, did the hunting and fighting — not that there was much to fight about in these non-hierarchical, communal societies. The few still surviving (Eskimo, Ituri Pygmy, African and Australian Bushman, etc.) produce the most gentle, peace-loving people in the world.

During our interview with her, Evelyn said that she is often asked how it happened — if women were respected and powerful for so many millenia — that they were beaten by the men? She explained that that is not what happened. The conflict was not so much between men and women as between the brotherhood and the fatherhood.

An example is the conquering of Egypt (one of the very few societies in which matriarchal structures survived the transition to hierarchical, state

organization) by patriarchal Rome. Contrary to patriarchal interpretation, which assumes that Queens and Kings are married to each other, it is hardly likely that Cleopatra was sleeping with her brother co-ruler. She had her children with the strangers, Anthony and Ceasar, who each made the mistake of assuming that that would make him the king in her brother's place without further ado. In fact, they had to fight to take over the rulership of Egypt, but it was armies of men who opposed them and fought for the matriarchy. The wars were not between men and women, but between differing ways of organizing society and very different modes of social control.

This conflict between brotherhood and fatherhood took place as much in the bosoms of individual men as between groups with differing social structures. Once a visiting lover became a live-in husband, his loyalties were divided between love and duty to his sisters' children and love for his wife's children. The children's loyalties in turn were divided between their father, who lived with them but was not their 'kin', and their mother's brother, who might live in a different village but shared the sacred blood-bond of the matriclan. For the first time, a feud between inter-mating clans meant a choice between killing your brothers or your fathers; guilt came into the world along with devils and demons and bad spirits and other nightmares, including the concept of blood sacrifice required to propitiate them. Then, as now, women were beaten through guilt, not through open confrontation with men. After all, wasn't



lust for a woman what caused a man to desert his own kin and cleave unto her and her children? Sex got a bad name, along with women, in the father-family.

Although she doesn't say any such thing, people attending Evelyn's lectures frequently reach the conclusion that it is *marriage* that is the root of all evil. Some get very upset by the idea. "What about love?" they ask. "What about child-care?" She points out that the nuclear father-family is first and foremost an economic unit of the larger society, in which the father is burdened with the support of the family and the mother is burdened with the care and work of raising the children. Old people, adolescents, maiden aunts and bachelor uncles — to say nothing of the major resources of the country itself — have little part to play in the care and support of children, who therefore become a burden on the two people solely responsible for them. Conjugal love and loving child-care are alike hard to maintain in such a set-up, as the statistics on divorce, child abuse, and delinquency testify all too clearly.

Compare attitudes to children in our nuclear family structure to the matrifocal attitude revealed in Camara Laye's autobiography, *The Dark Child*. In the world of Laye's childhood, fathers had come into the picture but they still lefty home to live in their wives' clan rather than vice versa and children still belonged to their mother's family. Hence, in the following excerpt, his paternal grandmother calls the child "little husband" rather than "little son", the term she would use for her daughter's boy. This indicates that he

belongs to the clan from which she and her clan-sisters obtain their husbands, and not to her own clan.

In this scene, the author is describing what used to go on when, as a small child, he would be taken to visit his father's people. His grandmother would come out to greet him and walk back with him and his uncle to their village:

I entered between my grandmother and my uncle, holding each by the hand. When we reached the first huts, my grandmother would shout: "Good people! My little husband has arrived!"

The women would come out of their huts and run toward us, crying joyfully: "But he's a regular little man. That's actually a little husband you have there."

They kept picking me up to embrace me. They examined my face closely, and not only my face but my city clothes which, they said, were quite splendid. They said that my grandmother was very lucky to have a little husband like me. They rushed up from all sides as if the chief of the canton in person were making his entrance into Tindican. And my grandmother smiled with pleasure.

I was greeted in this way at each hut and I returned the greeting of the women with an exuberance equalling theirs. Then, as it was my turn, I gave news about my parents. It used to take us two hours to cover the ground to my grandmother's house from the one or two huts we had passed on the outskirts of the village. And when these excellent women did leave us, they went to oversee the cooking of enormous dishes of

rice and fowl which they must bring us in time for the evening's feast.

This kind of treatment of course turns out very happy, respectful children, sure of their worth and the value of their contribution to community life. The work scenes in the book are as delightful as the scenes of play.

Like *The Dark Child*, Reed's book is a joyous inspiration to read and a celebration of our essential humanity in addition to being a major contribution to the field of anthropology. If there is a message behind the impressive scholarship of her book, it is that we have done it before and we can do it again. The transition from beast to human cannot have been much easier than the task before us now. She reminds us that we are not, like other animals, limited by instinct. "Make no mistake," she says, laughing and stroking the cat with loving fingers, "I am very fond of animals. But we are not like them. We are first and foremost social beings with decision-making power. We are not limited by our nature. Human nature is the most plastic thing in the world."

Of course. Of course it is. But we need such reminders when so many books around now tell us we are "naturally" greedy, competitive, violent, and mindlessly compelled by "territoriality".

We have also been gentle, loving, sharing people with respect for the earth and each other. A lot of people still are.

A note to myth and fiction fans: If you don't care for anthropology, read the chapter on the Greek plays viewed as myths of transition from matriarchy to patriarchy — you'll love it. ●

