

The History of Child Abuse by Lloyd deMause

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During the past three decades, I have spent much of my scholarly life examining primary sources such as diaries, autobiographies, doctor's reports, ethnographic reports and other documents that document what it must have felt like to have been a child--yesterday and today, in the East and the West, in literate and preliterate cultures.

In several hundred studies published by myself and my associates in The Journal of Psychohistory, we have provided extensive evidence that the history of childhood has been a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes--and the further away from the West one gets--the more massive the neglect and cruelty one finds and the more likely children are to have been killed, rejected, beaten, terrorized and sexually abused by their caretakers.

Indeed, my conclusion from a lifetime of psychohistorical study of childhood and society is that the history of humanity is founded upon the abuse of children. Just as family therapists today find that child abuse often functions to hold families together as a way of solving their emotional problems, so, too, the routine assault of children has been society's most effective way of maintaining its collective emotional homeostasis. Most historical families once practiced infanticide, erotic beating and incest. Most states sacrificed and mutilated their children to relieve the guilt of adults. Even today, we continue to arrange the daily killing, maiming, molestation and starvation of children through our social, military and economic activities. I would like to summarize here some of the evidence I have found as to why child abuse has been humanity's most powerful and most successful ritual, why it has been the cause of war and social violence, and why the eradication of child abuse and neglect is the most important social task we face today.

THE CHILD AS POISON CONTAINER

The main psychological mechanism that operates in all child abuse involves using children as what I have termed poison containers--receptacles into which adults project disowned parts of their psyches, so they can control these feelings in another body without danger to themselves. In good parenting, the child uses the caretaker as a poison container, much as it earlier used the mother's placenta as a poison container for cleansing its polluted blood. A good mother reacts with calming actions to the cries of a baby and helps it "detoxify"² its dangerous emotions. But when an immature mother's baby cries, she cannot stand the screaming, and strikes out at the child. As one battering mother put it, "I have never felt loved all my life. When the baby was born, I thought he would love me. When he cried, it meant he didn't love me. So I hit him."² Rather than the child being able to use the parent to detoxify its fears and anger, the parent instead injects his or her bad feelings into the child and uses it to cleanse his or herself of depression and anger.

Consider a typical infanticidal, incestuous culture, the Bimin-Kuskusmin of New Guinea. As is so often true in pre-literate cultures, the mothers have long post-partum taboos against sex with their husbands, sleep naked against their children until they are about four years old, have orgasms while nursing them and regularly masturbate them. One three-year-old boy describes how whenever his mother was sad or angry

she masturbated him so roughly that it hurt him, and he struggled to get away, complaining of a pain in his penis. "It hurts inside,"² he told the ethnologist. "It goes 'koong, koong, koong' inside. I think it bleeds in there I don't like to touch it anymore. It hurts when I pee..."² Sometimes, after his mother hurt him while masturbating him, he wounds himself in the thigh and abdomen with a sharp stick and draws blood, looking at his penis and saying, "Now it hurts here, outside, not in penis. Look, blood. Feels good..."² Although he is only three years old, he understands quite well that he is being used as a poison container by his mother to relieve her depression. He says, "Mother twist penis, tight...Hurt inside...Mother angry, hurt Buuktiin's penis. Mother sad, hurt Buuktiin's penis...Mother not like Buuktiin's penis, want to cut off..."

Maternal incest and pederasty by men are quite common in pre-literate groups and were common in earlier historical times. Boys in many New Guinea groups today, for instance, are so traumatized by the early erotic experiences, neglect and assaults on their bodies that they need to prove their masculinity when they grow up and become fierce warriors and cannibals, with a third of them dying in raids and wars. In fact, I have found that rather than the incest taboo being universal--as anthropologists claim--it is incest itself that has been universal for most children in most cultures in most times. A childhood more or less free from adult sexual use is in fact a very late historical achievement, limited to a few fortunate children in a few modern nations. To give you some idea of the extensive evidence I have gathered for such an unlikely conclusion, I would like to begin by summarizing the evidence which exists for the sexual abuse of children around the world today.

THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN TODAY

In America, the most accurate scientific studies, based on lengthy interviews, report that 30 percent of men and 40 percent of women remember having been sexually molested during childhood---defining "molestation" as actual genital contact, not just exposure. About half of these are directly incestuous, with the family members, the other half usually being with others, but with the complicity of caretakers in at least 80 percent of the cases. These experiences of seduction are not just pieced together from fragmentary memories, but are remembered in detail, are usually for an extended period of time and have been confirmed by follow-up reliability studies in 83 percent of the cases, so they are unlikely to have been fantasies. The seductions occurred at much earlier ages than had been previously assumed, with 81 percent occurring before puberty and an astonishing 42 percent under age 7. As high as these molestation rates seem, however, they represent only a portion of the true rates, not only because those interviewed do not include populations that have been shown to have extremely high rates---such as criminals, prostitutes, juveniles in shelters, psychotics, etc.--but also because only conscious memories were counted, and the earliest seductions of children are almost never remembered except during psychotherapy. Adjusting statistically for what is known about these additional factors, I have concluded that the real sexual abuse rate for America is 60 percent for girls and 45 percent for boys, about half of these directly incestuous.

Other Western nations have made fewer careful studies. A recent Canadian study by Gallup of 2,000 adults has produced incidence rates almost exactly the same as those found in the United States. Latin American family sexual activity--particularly widespread pederasty as part of macho sexuality--is considered even more widespread. In England, a recent BBC "ChildWatch" program asked its female listeners--a large though admittedly biased sample--if they remembered sexual molestation, and, of the 2,530 replies analyzed, 83 percent remembered someone touching their genitals, 62 percent recalling actual intercourse. In Germany, the Institut für Kindheit has recently concluded a survey asking West Berlin

schoolchildren about their sexual experiences, and 80 percent reported having been molested.

Outside the West, the sexual molestation of children is a routine practice in most families. Childhood in India begins, according to observers, with the child being regularly masturbated by the mother, the girl "to make her sleep well," the boy "to make him manly." The child sleeps in the family bed, witnesses and most likely takes part in sexual intercourse between the parents. The child is often "borrowed" to sleep with other members of the extended household, leading to the Indian proverb that "For a girl to be a virgin at ten years old, she must have neither brothers nor cousin nor father." Childhood is so eroticized that, as one Western observer put it, "The little Hindu girls are deflowered by the little boys with whom they play, and repeat together the erotic lessons which their parents have unwittingly taught them on account of the general promiscuity of family life throughout India. In all the little girls of less than ten years of age the complete hymen is wanting...Incest is often the rule rather than the exception."

Child marriage was, of course, a long-standing Indian practice. When laws were passed in 1929 trying to outlaw it, the government was overwhelmed by men insisting that early marriage was an absolute necessity, since little girls were naturally very sexual and must be married early if they are to be restrained from seducing adults. "Cupid overtakes the hearts of girls...at an early age," they said. "A girl's desire for sexual intercourse is eight times greater than that of males." Indian mothers also often supported early marriage, frankly admitting it was necessary in order to protect their little girls against rape in the family, saying that "they were afraid to leave their daughters at home, even for one afternoon, without a mother's eye and accessible to the men of the family."

The Indian subcontinent, in fact, still has many groups, such as the Baiga, where actual incestuous marriage is practiced, between fathers and daughters, between mothers and sons, between siblings and even between grandparents and their grandchildren--thus disproving the oft-repeated anthropological truism that "no known tribe has ever permitted incest" because if it were allowed society would surely cease functioning. In many of these villages, the children move at the age of 5 or 6 from the incestuous activities of the family bed to spend the rest of their childhood in sex dormitories, where they are initiated by older youth and men into intercourse with a succession of other children, none for longer than three days at a time, under threat of gang rape.

Childhood in China has historically had the same institutionalized rape rituals as in India, including the pederasty of boys, child concubinage, the castration of boys to be used sexually as eunuchs, marriage of young girls to a number of brothers, widespread boy and girl prostitution and the regular sexual use of child servants and slaves. So prevalent was the rape of little girls that Western doctors found that, as in India, few girls entering puberty had intact hymens. Even the universal practice of foot binding was for sexual purposes, with a girl undergoing extremely painful crushing of the bones of her feet for years in order that men could make love to her big toe as a fetish, a penis-substitute.

Childhood in contemporary Japan, although somewhat more Western than that of other Eastern nations, still includes masturbation by mothers "to put them to sleep." Parents often have intercourse with their children in bed with them, and "co-sleeping," with parents physically embracing the child, often continues until the child is ten or fifteen. One recent Japanese study found daughters sleeping with their fathers over 20 percent of the time after age 16. Recent sex surveys report memories

of sexual abuse even higher than comparable American studies, and "hot lines" of sexual abuse report mother-son incest in almost a third of the calls, the mother saying to her teenage son, "It's not good to do it alone. Your IQ becomes lower. I will help you, " or "You cannot study if you cannot have sex. You may use my body," or "I don't want you to get into trouble with a girl. Have sex with me instead." Historically, Japan has been one of the most endogamous societies in the world, with incestuous marriages in court circles being approved even in historical times and preferred sibling, cousin, uncle-niece and aunt-nephew marriages having been so extensive that genetics experts have discovered that the incestuous inbreeding has affected the size and health of the Japanese. Even today, there are rural areas in Japan where fathers marry their daughters when the mother has died or is incapacitated, "in accordance with feudal family traditions."

The sexual use of children in the Near East is as widespread as in the Far East. Historically, all the institutionalized forms of pedophilia which were customary in the Far East are documented extensively for the Near East, including child marriage, child concubinage, temple prostitution of both boys and girls, parent-child marriage (among the Zoroastrians), sibling marriage (quite common among Egyptians), sex slavery, ritualized pederasty and child prostitution. Masturbation in infancy is said to be necessary "to increase the size" of the penis, and older siblings are reported to play with the genitals of babies for hours at a time. Mutual masturbation, fellatio and anal intercourse are also said to be common among children, particularly with the older boys using younger children as sex objects. The nude public baths (hammam) are particularly eroticized in many areas, being especially notorious as a place of homosexual acts, both male and female.

Girls are used incestuously even more often than boys, since females are valued so little. One report found 80 percent of Near Eastern women surveyed recalled having been forced into fellatio between the ages of 3 and 6 by older brothers, cousins, uncles and teachers. The girls rarely complain, since "if there is any punishment to be meted out, it will always end up by being inflicted on her." Arab women know that their spouses are pedophiles and prefer having sex with children to having sex with them. Their retribution comes as follows. When the girl is about 6 years old, the women of the house grab her, pull her thighs apart and cut off her clitoris and often also her labia with a razor, thus usually ending her ability to feel sexual pleasure forever. One Egyptian woman relates her memory of how it happened to her. After being used sexually by the men in her family during her early childhood, she says:

I was six years old that night when I lay in my bed, warm and peaceful...I felt something move under the blankets, something like a huge hand...another hand was clapped over my mouth to prevent me from screaming.

They carried me to the bathroom...I remember...a rasping metallic sound which reminded me of the butcher when he used to sharpen his knife...My blood was frozen in my veins...my thighs had been pulled wide apart...I felt that the rasping knife or blade was heading straight down towards my throat. Then suddenly the sharp metallic edge seemed to drop between my thighs and there cut off a piece of flesh from my body.

I screamed with pain despite the tight hand held over my mouth, for the pain was not just a pain, it was like a searing flame that went through my whole body. After a few moments, I saw a red pool of blood around my hips. I did not know what they had cut off from my body, and did not try to find out. I just wept, and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found her standing by my side. Yes, it was her, I could not be mistaken, in flesh and blood, right in the

midst of these strangers, talking to them and smiling at them.

A recent survey of Egyptian girls and women showed 97 percent of uneducated families and 66 percent of educated families still practiced clitoridectomy. Nor is the practice decreasing--UN reports estimate that more than 74 million females have been mutilated, with "more female children mutilated today than throughout history."

Clitoridectomy, like all sexual mutilations, is, I believe, an act of incest. If it is incest when a father rapes a daughter, it is also incest when parents assault their children by cutting off, sewing up, burning, flaying or gashing their genitals. In all these cases, the child is being used for the sadistic sexual pleasure of the parent. In fact, circumcision ceremonies are often followed by drinking parties that end in intercourse, so sexually arousing is the circumcision---in some areas, the traveling circumcizer is actually accompanied by some prostitutes, who know how sexually excited villages become after the ceremony. Therefore, the practice of sexually mutilating children's genitals---one of the most widespread rituals in the world---by itself makes incest a near-universal trait.

THE EVOLUTION OF CHILDHOOD

Historically, the routine use of children as poison containers to prevent adults from feeling overwhelmed by their anxieties has also been universal. Examples from the history of childhood regularly reveal children are expected to "absorb" the bad feelings of their caretakers. As one peasant community in rural Greece puts it, you must have children around to put your bad feelings into, especially when the "Bad Hour" comes around. An informant describes the process as follows:

One of the ways for the Bad Hour to occur is when you get angry. When you're angry a demon gets inside of you. Only if a pure individual passes by, like a child for instance, will the "bad" leave you, for it will fall on the unpolluted.

Newborn infants, in particular, were perfect poison containers because they were so "unpolluted." The newborn then became so full of the parent's projections that even if he or she is allowed to live (up to half the children in early societies were murdered at birth), the infant had to be tied up--tightly swaddled in bandages for up to a year or more---to prevent it from "tearing its ears off, scratching its eyes out, breaking its legs, or touching its genitals," i.e., to prevent it from acting out the violent and sexual projections of the parents.

Children were particularly useful as poison containers when adults felt anxious about recent or impending success. Success stirs up superego retaliation, and the sacrifice of children to appease the gods--that is, the punitive parents--was an extremely widespread guilt-reducing device. Most early states practiced child sacrifice. Typical was Carthage, where a large cemetery has been discovered called The Tophet filled with over 20,000 urns deposited there between 400 and 200 B.C. The urns contained bones of children sacrificed by their parents, who often would make a vow to kill their next child if the gods would grant them a favor--for instance, if their shipment of goods were to arrive safely in a foreign port. Some urns contain the bones of stillborn babies along with the bones of two-year-olds, indicating that if the promised child was not born alive, an older child had also to be killed to satisfy the promise. The sacrifice was accompanied by a music, wild dancing and riotous orgy, and was probably accompanied by the ritual rape of virgin girls, as it was with the Incans. Plutarch told how the priests would "cut their throats as if they were so many lambs or young birds; meanwhile the mother stood by without a tear or moan [while] the whole area before the statue was filled with a loud noise of flutes and drums..."