

## The Ancient Female Identity

Gender has become a hot topic in contemporary society. Regardless of one's stance on these discussions that can often become largely controversial, it is good to have sufficient familiarity with the historical facts as a way to bring more tangible ideas to the conversation. How has gender played a role in other societies throughout history? Looking throughout many ancient societies, it is clear that they each defined their own roles for women and for men. What is very interesting however, is not only to see their differences, but to see their similarities between all of the different civilizations, especially in times when there was little to no contact between them. This in fact is a very interesting occurrence in all aspects of civilizations' progress throughout time. For now, though, we will analyze the varying roles in various cultures that gender, more specifically women, have played around the world in different time periods.

We may begin our expedition in Classical China, with the example of one woman, Ben Zhao (c. 45-120 C.E.). What can what we learn about her life teach us about the rest of her fellow contemporary women? When making such an analysis, we must keep in mind the fact that "Ban Zhao was a remarkable woman in a period when most families saw their daughters as little more than economic burdens" (174). This helps us to know that all we learn about her cannot be directly applied to the rest of these women, but yet, can still be used as a good point of reference. Ben Zhao was married at age 14 (174). She was well educated, coming from a scholarly family (174). At age 30 she joined the court after her husband died and went on to publish many literary works that were largely celebrated in China (174). One of her works "Lessons for Women" even tells us directly how women were expected to behave. One excerpt describes 4 qualifications or traits that woman must have: "1. Womanly virtue, 2. womanly words, 3. womanly bearing, 4. womanly work" (175). It also emphasizes the importance that cleanliness and chores such as sewing and weaving were to be had by women. These give us great insights as to what it meant to be a woman in ancient China. Ultimately it is concluded that in this place and time, women were deemed by men to be an inferior role in their society (174). It also gives us a great base to begin with, allowing us to compare what we have gathered to that of other cultures.

Crossing the world to the ancient Aztecs, we see some immediate similarities. Women were also expected to take cleanliness very seriously. Most women were reduced to domestic roles, tasked with cleaning and food preparation (545). One thing that is unique though, about many of their jobs here is that they were looked upon as sacred rituals (545), rather than just menial laborious tasks. Also very similar to what we see in China, such as Ben Zhao, who was well educated and seemed to have a higher status than an average woman, women in ancient Aztec society could also gain higher prestige if they were born into the right family. "Only noblewomen enjoyed broad exemption from manual work. Sources suggest that some women assumed minor priestly roles. Others worked as surgeons and herbalists. Midwifery was also a fairly high-status, female occupation." (545). It is also worth mentioning that polygamy was practiced by some noblemen as a way of expanding their prestige. (546) Furthermore, women were also highly valued for their reproductive capacity, as birthing provided new people that

would “aid the empire’s perpetual war effort” (545). Given all of these facts, we see that women may have had similar occupations as in China, yet they also possessed more value to their counterparts than just being “economic burdens”.

For the Bantu people, childbearing was also a very important part of womanhood. It in fact “signified a woman’s entry into full adulthood” (234). What is very different from what we have examined so far however, is the division of labor that was practiced in this society. While women were still in charge of cooking and other domestic chores (235) it was also the role of women to do all of the farming, while the men would clear forests for cultivation (234). For these two reasons of childbearing, polygamy was practiced and encouraged for practical reasons as opposed to what we see with the ancient Aztec peoples. Another large difference was that “matrilineal descent was the cornerstone of Bantu social organization. Status, goods, and political office were inherited from mothers, and a man usually moved to his wife’s village upon marriage” (234). Despite this elevated status that women had in comparison to other parts of the world, decision making authority within a family still fell to the man (235). Once again, we see another male dominant society with very defined roles that women must fill, but that differ more than what else we have looked at so far.

In ancient Mesopotamia we also see women beginning to gain more rights in other aspects that we’ve seen. Under Hammurabi’s law, “Women were somewhat protected...The wife’s dowry was her own and could not be taken away upon divorce” (57). There has been little mention as to the legal rights women had in other societies, likely being for the reason that they were very limited or there were none. Here we see though, that it was prominent enough in their day to stand the test of time and come to be known in the present. Despite this however, men continue in our study, to be the dominant sex. “Hammurabi’s laws and other contemporary sources indicate clearly that Mesopotamian society was a patriarchy: women were always subject to a man” (57). Furthermore women continued to have strong ties to the house with tasks such as cooking, grinding grain, making pottery and weaving” (48), all tasks that we have seen in the rest of the societies that we have examined.

Finally, make one more large jump across the vast ocean to the ancient South-American Andes Mountains and find the Incan civilization. Consistent with previous cultures, “women labored to maintain households” (553). Despite this fact though, “women occupied a distinct sphere from that of men, but not a subordinate one” (558), making the Inca’s very unique in this aspect, as well as a great spot to end our tour of different groups of women. Incas were still patrilineal, but in everyday tasks “both sexes participated equally” in what included agriculture and “contests against neighboring clans” (558). Incan noblewomen even “exercised considerable behind the scenes power over imperial succession.” This example here is quite possibly much greater than any other amount of power that we have seen or known about from the other groups that we have looked at. We can then conclude that women of Incan societies possessed the most power out of the other 4, while their day to day labors seem to stay consistent in comparison.

In closing, it is very intriguing to see that despite differences in geography and culture, women were almost always generally assigned housekeeping duties, and were, in all but one case, subjects to men. This certainly begs the great question of “why?”. What is the cause of this recurrence across disconnected civilizations? We may not know the answer right now, but

even so, understanding what roles gender has played in the past can be helpful as we address the topic today, regardless of what our stance may be.