Chapter 5

Glimpses of Ancestral Family Life

INTRODUCTION

Glimpses of family life\(^1\) and society among these Ancients can be obtained from our analysis of length of life (Chapter 4). We can infer the ages of Adam and Eve when they first joined, assuming that they were *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and about how long they lived together before one or the other died. Whether they loved each other, whether Adam helped with the children and the housework, and similar questions we cannot answer. Some answers can be guessed. But the intimate facts that make for a bestseller romance novel are beyond the capabilities of a life table to uncover. We leave such “descriptions, deceptions, and findings” to the writers of bestsellers.

In the following pages, then, we shall infer what we can about marriage formation and the size of the population providing the marriage partners. Next we shall explore the probable frequency of widow–widowerhood. Then we estimate the frequency of orphanhood and from this we infer what we can about the nuclear family versus the extended family. We also estimate their possible birthrates. On the basis of these observations, we discuss the implications of mortality for the size of the group, band, or tribe.

\(^1\) For observations on the role of women in addition to childbearing, see Dahlberg (1981).
MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Marriage Formation

Everyone capable of mating, coupling, or marriage and presumably capable of reproduction, must have done so, considering how high the death rates were. The tribe or band could not afford to have any of its members sitting on the sidelines, so to speak, that is, not coupling or refusing to bear children. From this we infer that marriage would take place at the youngest possible age. How old a girl or woman was—12 years, 15 years, older?—cannot be said with certitude because it depended on her nutritional well-being. She must have enough body fat to bring about menarche and maintain ovulation. Menarche is delayed in malnourished girls. Further, when menarche is delayed, menopause commonly occurs early (Cassidy, p. 132). Because we do not know the precise state of nutrition among the prehistoric Amerindians nor the possible variation from tribe to tribe, we cannot specify age of menarche and marriage. We note only that (a) although social marriage can occur before menarche, there is no advantage to the group if children do not result; and (b) the band needed all the births possible if it were to continue to exist.

In our society there is a tendency to equate marriage with monogamy, although recognizing that polygyny and polyandry exist. However, when death rates are very high, a tribe cannot afford to have celibate adults in the reproductive ages. They represent lost opportunities to increase the size of the group. Whether a group “needs” to increase its size is not for us to say. We simply note that virtually every population, nation, band, or tribe wants more people, either for purposes of warfare, assumed international (or intertribal) importance, or some other illogical reason.²

Polygyny must have been common among the prehistoric Amerindians. The very high death rates would have led in many instances, to a lack of marriage partners and the necessity to “double up.” Driver (1961, p. 276) suggests that the vast majority of North American peoples practiced polygamy. He then qualifies his remarks by noting that exclusive monogamy was the rule among the Iroquois and some of their neighbors.

Marriage Dissolution

Unlike modern times, divorce was not needed to dissolve a marriage. Death of one spouse did it. Whether there were separations in addition to deaths among

²In the case of ancient China, and perhaps twentieth-century China also, population growth was viewed as an indication that the ruling government was good. So the statisticians, when presenting numbers to the emperor, exaggerated “so as to please the reigning emperor” (Chen 1946, p. 2).