

CHAP. IX.

SITUATION OF WOMEN. MARRIAGES. POLYGAMY.
POPULATION. PERIOD OF CHILD BEARING. NAMES
OF MEN AND WOMEN.

THE female sex does not hold in Africa that distinguished rank in society which it happily enjoys in Europe; a circumstance which will not excite surprise, as it occurs among all rude and uncivilized nations. Montesquieu says, that the existence of a money medium is a certain mark of civilization; but it will probably be found a less fallible criterion, to judge by the degree of respect in which women are held. Among the Arabs and eastern nations in general, women are in a state of degradation; all the menial offices, and some of the most laborious kind, fall to their lot. The North American Indians also affect to hold them in the uttermost contempt. In Africa, women are regarded as beings of an inferior nature, and as born to be the slaves of man; they are not admitted to eat at the same table, but must wait till their lord has finished his repast, when they are allowed the scraps which he may have left. Upon them devolves all the drudgery of the family, they not only cook, and wash, beat rice*, and

* They beat the rice in wooden mortars, shaped somewhat like an hour glass, and called peloons; instead of a pestle they
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clean it from the husk, but they cut down the underwood, assist in hoeing the ground, and they also carry the produce to market. The only labour from which they are excused, is felling the larger wood to make a plantation, and rowing in canoes. In places near the sea, they are also busied in making salt*, though this is generally the province of women who are advanced in years, and of old infirm men.

Polygamy is universally practised upon this coast, which tends still more to debase the female sex. Every man may have as many wives as his circumstances will allow him to maintain; his wealth is therefore estimated according to this criterion, and he rises in the esteem of his neighbours in proportion to the number of his wo-

use a stake five or six feet long. The rice is beaten night and morning, before each meal, not from idleness, but because it is better preserved from insects while in the husk. Similar to this was the custom of the eastern nations, who ground their corn every day in hand mills as they wanted it. It is common to see a dozen women and girls ranged in a line beating rice, and while one sings, the others keep exact time, and join in the chorus. They are extremely careful, in the preparation of this their favourite grain, to free it from the husk, and to wash it from dust and every impurity.

* For this purpose the water of a creek, or of the sea at spring tides, is received into large shallow ponds, where it is permitted to evaporate by the heat of the sun; the saline crust which remains is scraped up with a portion of earth, and again dissolved in warm salt water, to which a quantity of wood ashes is added. This solution is poured into a basket of a conical form, at the apex of which a little straw is placed, to prevent the earthy matter from passing through; the solution is finally evaporated to dryness in large round, shallow, brass pans, called Neptunes, which are sent out from Europe in the way of trade.

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men*. The husband is at liberty, however, to employ his wives in the manner most advantageous to his own interest, and it is not uncommon to station some of them in different parts of the country as factors, an office which they execute with great fidelity. The ancient custom of purchasing the wife may be said in some measure to exist here, though the sum paid seldom amounts to more than a small present of cloth to the father or guardian, together with some tobacco and rum for an entertainment. The consent of the woman is scarcely necessary in making the contract, which is concluded by the husband and father with very little ceremony. Their marriages, however, are not indissoluble, as in case of ill usage from the husband, the woman, if free and of a powerful family, may call a palaver, and be separated from him. Polygamy, though the source of many evils, does not produce those violent commotions in families which husbands in Europe might be led to apprehend. The women, by habit and education, are so much accustomed to the practice, that a younger rival scarce excites in them any emotion of jealousy. A Foola woman of some consequence and much good sense, whose husband had four wives, being asked if she did not wish to reign alone, replied in the negative; for as she was not *company* for her husband, she would be quite at a loss for amusement, were it not for the conversation of his other

* If it be asked whether such a person be rich? the answer is, "Oh, he has too much woman."

wives*. The first wife a man takes, enjoys a greater share of respect than the others, and retains the title of head woman, with a degree of enviable authority, long after her personal charms have ceased to enslave her husband's affections.

Polygamy is not more adverse to the civilization of a country than to its population, and if we except China, those countries where this practice prevails will in general be found less populous than others. Many authors, however, are of a different opinion, which they support by alleging, that some men in tropical countries have fifty or sixty children; this, however, is not so common as it is for a man in Europe to have a dozen; and when we reflect that they are the offspring of nearly as many women, who might each have borne three or four children, had each had her own husband, the loss to society will appear very great. Some have argued, among whom may be reckoned Mr. Bruce, that as a greater number of

* Polygamy has been considered, though on very insufficient grounds, as an insurmountable obstacle to the introduction of the christian religion in Africa. The Mahommedans, in propagating their tenets, have had to contend with obstacles apparently as insuperable—the use of spirits, for instance; which they have overcome by their zeal and steady perseverance. These people, in gaining proselytes, direct their chief care to the children, whose education they superintend with unremitting attention; but as it is necessary to obtain the sanction of the old people, who are highly flattered in being thought either Mahommedans or Christians, they overlook in them those habits of intemperance which long custom has rendered inveterate. As a further proof that christianity may flourish in a warm climate, the people of Abyssinia and Nubia are christians, and do not practise polygamy. But the history of primitive christianity has already sufficiently proved the point.

females are born in eastern nations than males, polygamy becomes a matter of political expediency; but the fact is questioned. Niebuhr is of opinion, that in the east there are not more females born than males; and although in the lists of births which he gives, the balance is somewhat in favour of the females, he adds, "allowing that this trifling superiority actually exists, it cannot have determined the eastern nations to polygamy." He further observes, "it cannot be doubted that polygamy hurts population. If there be instances that a man has had a number of children by several women, it has also been observed, that monogamists have in general more children than polygamists." I do not doubt the truth of this observation. Whatever disproportion may arise in other countries between the sexes, it certainly does not prevail in any material degree about Sierra Leone, where the number of men and women seem pretty equally balanced. This natural equality of the sexes, however, is destroyed by the prevalence of polygamy; although its effect is counteracted by the slave trade, which carries annually from the coast a considerably greater number of men than women. It is no uncommon practice, in order to cement a friendship more strongly, for two men to promise to each other for wives their unborn infants if they should prove to be females. Notwithstanding this, it is rare to see a man without a wife, solely from not being able to find one.

Agreeably to what has been already said, the population of the Windward Coast of Africa is extremely small: it would be very difficult to determine what may be the proportion of inhabitants to a given extent of country; but probably it is not so much as in the least populous countries in Europe. Mr. Smeathman confirms this remark; he observes that this country is so thinly peopled, "that we rarely find a town containing two or three hundred inhabitants within ten or fifteen leagues of another of the same population. The finest rivers will not have towns upon them, where, perhaps, there are a hundred persons, within a long tide's distance of each other*."

The length of time women suckle their children, may be mentioned as another obstacle to population; as, during this period, which is generally two years, or until the child be able to bring to its mother a calabash full of water †, they are entirely separated from their husbands ‡.

* Wadstrom Append.

† This practice, though in itself bad, is founded upon prudential motives; for the mother, upon whom devolves the whole care of her children, is afraid of being burthened with a second offspring before the first can in some degree dispense with her continued care. It is very common for a woman who has a child, to procure another wife for her husband during the time she is nursing.

‡ During the period of mourning also for a friend or relation, the wife separates herself from her husband. The caprice or jealousy of the head woman, sometimes obliges a favourite rival to put on mourning upon some frivolous pretext, hoping at the same time to procure some presents from the husband to remove the restraint.

It is rather a rare occurrence to meet with women in Africa who have had more than three or four children. This is not occasioned by their leaving off child-bearing so very early in life, as is said to be the case in warm climates; for I have seen women have children, who certainly were not younger than thirty-five or forty*. Although the women are betrothed at a very early age, and as has been said, even before *they are born*, the marriage seldom, if ever, takes place before the

* There is no doubt that women in hot climates arrive somewhat sooner at maturity than in the more temperate and colder ones, and that child-bearing also sooner terminates. But we may doubt if this be so early, or so generally the case in these countries as authors assert, it being extremely difficult or impossible to ascertain ages, where a few revolutions of the moon is the greatest space of time they retain in their memories. This is a subject which affords scope for much curious investigation, it not being easy to explain why in some hot countries the period of child-bearing is confined within such narrow limits, as many authors have represented it to be. Perhaps the effect, if it really exist, will be found to be produced by particular situations, or confined to certain countries, in which case the discordant opinions of authors¹ upon the point might be reconciled. That these circumstances may have some share in producing such effects appears probable from the observations of a very accurate observer, who says, that "white females, born and constantly residing in the lower districts of the province of Georgia in America, have seldom been observed to live beyond the age of forty. Males, sometimes approach fifty; while Europeans, who have arrived at manhood before they come to the country, often attain a good old age." The same author gives us a still more surprising instance of the effects of certain situations in shortening the period of life. "There is not on record, I am credibly informed," he says, "an instance of a person born at Petersburg in Virginia, and constantly residing in the same place, who has lived to the age of twenty-one." *Jackson on Fevers*.

¹ Compare Bruce and Niebuhr with Piso and Ouseley.

fourteenth year; and, judging from appearances, no women in this part of Africa bear children before that age.

Another obstacle to the population of this country infinitely greater than any hitherto noticed, and more dreadful in its consequences than war, pestilence, and famine, is "that cruel trade which spoils unhappy Guinea of her sons," and which annually sends from her shores many thousands of young people in the bloom of life.

It may perhaps appear to contradict the observation already made respecting the low rank which women hold in Africa, to state, that men generally are named after their mothers; thus, Fenda Modoo, is Modoo or Mahommed the son of Fenda; and Namina Modoo, Mahommed the son of Namina; and the same may be said of the females, Kalee Namina, for instance, signifies Namina the daughter of Kalee*. This arises probably from the practice of polygamy, which makes it easier among a number of children of the same family to distinguish them by their mothers' names, than if each had his father's pre-

* The most frequent names of men among the Mahommedans are Mamadoo, or Mahommed, Ali, Amarah, Brama, (Abraham); of the women, Amina, or as they pronounce it, Námina, Fatima, Maimoona, and Henda. Simba, Sillia, Yamba, Lorana, Tilla, Yellee, Kai, Boi, are the most common female names among the Soosoos, Bulloms, and Timmanees. The Foolas frequently use an affix, which, like the Italian diminutives, implies prettiness, tenderness, &c. as Fatimatta, Isatta, Aminetta, Sallematta. Nicknames are sometimes given expressive of the person's disposition, as Pa Cacadooga, *i. e.* great belly, or covetous; Pa Toffin, *i. e.* can't talk, or wont talk.

fixed. Among the Arabs it is usual for a man to add his father's name, and sometimes that of a favourite son to his own; but among the Turks it is not unfrequent to add that of the mother. The same custom is noticed by Herodotus*, as peculiar to the Lycians. Another reason for the general assumption of the mother's name may be found in the warmth of filial affection, which, where polygamy prevails, is usually in much more lively exercise towards mothers than towards fathers. I have been often gratified by observing the strength and tenderness of the attachment subsisting between mothers and their sons.

* Clio, clxxiii. à matribus nomina sibi induunt, non a patribus.