Women in the Archaeological Record: The Case of the Sudan

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1. Preamble: The archaeology of gender includes several different themes; which have, to some extent, succeeded one another since early 1980 (Johnson 1999: 118). They have been grouped into four visibility scenes by Sorensen: (1) visibility of women in interpretations of the past (2) visibility of women in the disciplinary history (3) visibility of women in the job market (4) Visibility of women in representations (Sorensen 2000: 26). Researches have proved that gender is not given or static but cultural and variable so we expect its expressions to be subjected to great variation.

2. Material culture: Material culture plays an indispensable role in forming gender ideology. Each gender category uses material culture in distinctive ways. (Andrew 2005: 23) Material culture does not passively reflect society, but can be an important tool in changing gender structures. According to Dommasnes, the symbolic value of material culture is not always immediately visible but can be understood through the study of the dialectic between people and the objects that surround them (Dommasnes 1996: 4).

3. Traditional interpretation of burial finds: The male world had been understood to be connected with responsibility and with certain activities, whereas the female one was perceived as passive and of secondary importance. Hence hunting and war are more important than kitchen work and rearing of children, peripheral functions.

Quern stone for man means that he was involved in making them while for the woman her tasks included seed grinding. A grinding pestle for example is usually taken as indicator of a female grave, woman grinding activity however no such activity is inferred when the grave is of a male (Andrew ibid: 38). Also traded objects in male burial are usually interpreted as a expression of some sort of participation in trading activities or as wealth. In female tombs the same items are seen as the symbol of their husband wealth or perhaps something that had belonged to them or funerary gifts from relatives. Only in few cases are they interpreted as showing a temporary participation in trade.

4. Funerary archaeology: is vital element of any research into past gender categorization. In burials we come to perceive the appropriate ways to treat the deceased and the definition of social classes and gender roles. Changes in the way which different categories of gender are treated, give us an insight into gender relations in society under study. Rules may apply to the location, orientation and position of the dead body. At Kadruka site, Neolithic of central Sudan slightly late 4000 BC, the cemetery KDK 1 developed around an exceptionally rich burial of a man. The spatial organization of burials presents a division into two groups. The one at summit develops in concentric circles around tomb 131, which includes all ages and sexes. The tombs further from the center are poor in goods. The other group on the slope has higher percentage of females with poorer goods or completely absent (Reinold 2004: 43). Children and adolescent burials were scattered amongst them. Cemetery KDK 18 had 118 burials with dates 4500–4350 BC the spatial development of the cemetery which in this case seemed to have been established around the burial of a woman within a circle of half dozen other graves. At Kadero site, Neolithic of central Sudan, the burials are distributed on central and eastern part of the mound. Adults of both sexes, juveniles and children were interred, but the children are less presented (Krzyzaniak in Welsby & Anderson 2004: 50) During the classic Kerma period spatial development of burials around the royal burial is noticed and interpreted as senior elites. The distribution of the royal females of Meroe is an important source of information about their status. At al-kurru two wadis divide the cemetery into three sections. The centre occupied by the main burial of the 25th dynasty, to the south six pyramids of royal women of 25th dynasty. There are more tombs in the northern section. At Nuri pyramids were built on two parallel plateau, the highest occupied by Taharqa pyramid, the outcrop of the west plateau queens' pyramids are located. While other kings
pyramids are situated on the east plateau. Thus it is clear that kings' mothers were buried in the southern group, the largest tombs of the cemetery. (Lohwasser 2001: 66). At Sanam Abu Dom site, post Meroitic period, grave no. 221 the male is laid in extended position and the female in contracted position on her right side, this has been interpreted as women adherence to local burial customs and of the man to more fashionable Egyptian customs (Adams 1977: 289-90).

As for the interred goods at Kadruka, the richest Neolithic burials so far found so far in the Middle Nile, the excellent condition of preservation allowed much of the material to survive; including fragmentary leather garment, smaller bone tools. The grave includes 9 mace heads, ivory bracelets, a diorite palette, pottery, anthropomorphic statuettes s well as bucrania. The burials were also quite regular, laid in a contracted position, most if not all buried on the left side with their heads towards the east. Several types of artifacts including palettes, marine shells; mace heads, calceiform vases and anthropomorphic figurines seems to be restricted to male burials on the upper mound. Distinctions between the sexes have also been noted, but do not appear to be associated only with male burials, while in another they are found with females (Edwards 2004: 56). Again at early Kerma sites leather kilts were the body dress, beside personal jewelry including beads of egg shell, faience and stone, earrings and necklaces and with their sandals beside them. Male burial have been found accompanied with their bows and arrows and adorned with ostrich feather plumes. Sandals & leather garment which is sometimes decorated with beads is found with the C. group. In some cases women have heads covered by leather hairnet. At a Napatan burial in Kerma bead nets made out of tubular faience beads were sometimes placed over female burials. (Edwards 135). During the Meroitic period the grave goods vary according to wealth or status, ranging from richly furnished royal burials to simplest forms perhaps accompanied by no more than a pottery jar and a cup. Much of the pottery buried with the dead in Kush is of the same types as these used by the living. Pots decorated with representations of offering tables together in some cases with the symbol of Isis may have been produced for use as female mortuary goods (Welsby; 83). Pots with burned human bones found at the sun temple Meroe, its meaning is not clear, whether it was ritual or not. At Ballana queens and kings during AD 5th-6th centuries buried with human sacrifices together with animals (fig 1.)

5. Age: Also it seems that gender studies would benefit from considering the effect of age in the definition of gender categories. In some societies particular age groups within the population were buried apart like enfant or child cemetery. Occasionally children are identified through association with particular types of material culture e.g. child sandal from Roman London, feeding bottles, toys etc. They can be identified also through more direct traces such as finger prints on ceramic artifacts (Puebloan figurines), through ethnographic researches which show children helping in stages of pottery making and metallurgy. (Andrew ibid 44-45). The passage from one age group to another usually entails the acquisition of new rights and duties. (ibid: 15). At Kadadah site in central Sudan, children under six are not buried on the cemetery but in jars at settlement site. That means after six a person can be a full member of society (Reinold 2000:65) while at Kadruka children and adults graves are mixed. And they receive the same attention as far as grave goods are concerned. The good example in grave no 45 in KDK 1, who died under 4 has 4 pots, cow skull, bracelet and polished axe.

6. Archaeology of children as a recent interest in archaeology, the study of children and their gender development. Can children be engendered or ungendered? Why are not recognized? Is it simply because they are not recognized when the skeletal remains are missing, because children were not accompanied with gender markers, like jewellery or weapons? (8). In pagan Anglo-Saxon graves east England children both male and female were treated as females in terms of their associated grave goods. Studies and researches indicate that we can arrive at different conclusions. At the Neolithic site al Kadero (Central Sudan) furnished child burials suggest ascribed social status (Krzyzaniak 1991). At Kadadah (180km north of Khartoum) grave goods in a child and adult grave, the pendants found near the child neck (Reinold 2000). At Kerma a copper dagger was found placed on hip of young child, less than 2 years old. He wore a large discoid gold pendant, two gold earrings as well as bracelets and anklet made of faience, beside a lamb and few ceramics. At Sanam Abu Dom women, young girls and children are provided with jewelry. Child burials with adults in the same area, were uncovered during the middle Kerma period. The Kerma 2 years child grave was superimposed over a woman
tomb and appear to be associated with one of the important tumuli of the area.

Coffins and cartonage in the Kushite period are also used for children as the example from Meroe west cemetery, a plain oval cartonage contained child only (Welsby 1996: 82).

7. Status Studies of gender and kinship are strongly attached to the studies of status whether it is associative, achieved or ascriptive; and all need to be understood together. According to O'shea women of the Mokrin wearing head ornament owned that right to their relationship with particular men (O'shea1996: 109). In Thailand at Khok Phanom Di, elaborate female graves containing thousand of beads, beautiful pots, red ochre, clay anvils and cylinders of potting clay. There is evident association here between women and pottery: perhaps these women were distinguished in death as potters, their skill had brought them respect and prosperity thus attained status. In addition these richly gifted women were accompanied by elaborate enfant graves though they were also succeeded by poorer descendants presumably daughter and grand daughters thus status through achievement and not inherited. Thus rich infant burials express their mothers' rank and esteem and of maternal grief at their death.

The higher number of female burials in Mesolithic Sudan and adjacent areas has been interpreted as the result of high status of women in society (Fernandez 2003: 41) The queens of Meroe, were famous as mentioned by the classic writers. Recent studies has proved that this status had its origin in their predecessors, the royal mothers, wives, sisters & daughters from the 25th dynasty down through the Napatan period to the reign of Nastasen. The sources range from inscriptional (lengthy royal texts on stelae to labels accompanying representations of royal women, to inscriptions on objects) to representational (depiction of royal women on stelae & temple walls) to tombs and the goods associated with it (Lohwasser 2001:61). All these types of evidence indicate that women participated in religious and enthronement ceremonies as well as being goddesses. Some titles imply a specific status at court like noble women, first great wife of his majesty. Other titles were used in parallelism with those of the king like Mistress of the two lands. Royal women are defined as sharing power to rule, the feminine equivalent of the king. This role had been carried well into the Medieval and post medieval period. Royal women were mentioned and represented in association with the coronation ceremony. The king was always accompanied by female members of his family mother or wife. They were not only attending but assisting on the occasion by shaking a sistrum and libation exercising priestly functions at this important moment which launches the king's reign and granting it authenticity. They participated in the cult, communing themselves with the gods. Another indicator of status is the headdress; different kinds of headdresses reflecting differing status among royal women. Only royal women of higher rank were allowed to wear crowns and the uraeus.

8. Power is another theme of gender studies in archaeology; to explore the evidence for women's power in past societies. Female warrior burials are uncovered from the Ukraine and Caucasus (fifth century BC and later), and from East Yorkshire Anglo-Saxon (Pearson 2003: 97-100). The Viking women enjoyed power in authority in the growing economic arena of foreign trade also held considerable power in the house hold, as made clear from the 10th century onwards in their rich and elaborately constructed graves. Yet women appear generally to have had influence rather than direct power except within the household. (ibid: 102). The matrilocal Iroquois women according to Morgan ethnographic analysis of the 19th century controlled food production and distribution and life in the longhouse and had major influence on male council elders, ritual specialist and war parties. In addition to political power, other types of power are possible like ability to mediate; a feature favorably considered for leadership in some American societies, and ability to impose will on others in social action and interpersonal relations (Andrew ibid: 20).

At KDK 21 the main burial of a female with sacrificed male placed in the same grave to the north indicates that women also have a powerful place in society (Reinold ibid 42). Weapons and jewellery during middle Kerma period indicate status was inherited and maintained with elite families. Personal jewellery still abundantly displayed with male burials accompanied by their bows and leather quivers. The royal tombs of the classic Kerma 1750-1500 BC indicate the growing political power. During the Napatan period at el-Kurru both kings and queens were buried under pyramids, at Nuri 19 kings and more than 50 queens were buried.
At Al Hobagi, post Meroitic site to the north of the royal city, there is an abundant representation of military power in the graves. Buried around the funerary couch was a set of a dozen broad bladed ceremonial spears, axes, swords, at least one bow and several quivers full of arrows. During the preceding period weaponry is relatively rare but bows and arrows are increasingly common in later Meroitic male burials of lesser rank. To the north at Ballana and Qustul kings buried with their royal regalia including silver crowns and ceremonial spears and other military equipment similar to that found at al Hobagi in central Sudan. This is beside imported objects like wooden boxes with ivory inlay, toilet articles, jewellry as well as pottery.

9. A model from the Sudan: Haaland has created carefully a model that combined archaeology, ethnography and archaeological theory. Her thesis is that the basic organizational principles in the early Mesolithic societies was gender; as a social organization important to small scale societies. Her model is based on pottery production and its advantages: as means for boiling food with its consequences represented in change of diet, that led to early infant weaning and increase of women fertility; its making possible the year round storage of food.(Haaland ibid:376). Burden of moving would be felt by women thus they would prefer sedentary way of life Therefore, she focused on activities probably carried by women.

This argument is supported by the large amount of archaeological remains from three sites, along River Atbara, Sudan, that appear to have been the product of women's activities, and the ethnographic evidence that support her hypothesis about the role of women in the process of becoming sedentary. According to Haaland, the perspective of sedentism as a preferred transformation in relation to gender roles has not been given attention (ibid: 378). Ethnographic observations among contemporary foraging peoples, have shown that gathering of plant food are generally a female activity and so is preparation by grinding and cooking. Although the production of lithic tools is seen as a male activity but in west Sudan and Tanzania it is women who make lithic grinding stones. Ethnographic material from Sudan shows that even when grinding stones are used for other activities such as grinding of iron ore for smelting is performed by women. This illustrates how closely grindstones are connected with females' ayicultural processes from their results preserved in the archaeological objects, the transition from a mobile to more sedentary ways of life and its implications for emergence of female-dominated, hearth centered activities and with this elaboration of symbolism derived from features and functions of the female body (ibid: 374).

10. Role of women in present day Sudan other than hearth centered work: -

   a. In most parts of the country they still participate in agricultural activities either as joint work in family farm (southern, northern and central Sudan), or by cultivating their own small farms next to their houses (Western Sudan Kordofan & Darfur, Blue Nile, Nuba Mountain).
   
   b. Herding of animals near the village or the camp in case of transhumance groups (eastern Sudan, the Butana region -between the Nile and River Atbara-).
   
   c. Trade in traditional handcraft made of different materials.
   
   d. Participate in building permanent or temporary houses, for the latter they make the material used for building like mats, and the decoration of both types of houses.
   
   e. Teaching of Quran in Khalwas (small Quran School).

Conclusions:

1. The classification of burials on the basis of the offerings compared with the results of the data on sex provided by physical anthropologists produced an unexpected outcome; one of them the third gender. Thus skeletal remains analysis is essential beside chemical analysis. Bones malformation and pathologies used as methods to verify links between certain activities and particular gender categories. Also change in the diet through stable isotope ratio analysis in bone collagen.
2. Not all those burials that contained only jewellery were women's and not all those contained only weapons were men's. The dichotomy of weapons and jewellery was not, after all, a symbol for gender, but perhaps for other types of identities such as real or assumed ancestry.

3. Ethnographic observation is the corner stone for such study. Most of the ethnographic work has been done within a male-biased setting in which this type of issue is not addressed or is seen from a male perspective. The assumption that men are the strongest element in political power has now been challenged by anthropological studies which demonstrate that in some societies individuals from any gender may hold power (Andrew ibid: 19).

4. The study of gender has to be guided by flexibility, as it is no longer valid to use our own ideas of gender to understand those of other societies including those of the past (Andrew ibid: 17). Some archaeologists have looked in whether or not women resisted male domination and whether the dominant gender used coercion to maintain its power (difficult to detect in archaeological record). (ibid: 21).

5. According to Barth meaning is something conferred on an object or an event by a person not something enshrined in that object or event that is it arises in the act of interpretation (Barth quoted in Haaland 1997). Yet the meaning is not merely a matter of arbitrary fanciful projection from anything to anything with no constraints. By defining gender as cultural and not biological one is also defining it as something that goes on in people minds. The study of gender thus becomes part of the study of meaning, and we recognize the problem: how to infer meaning from non verbal sources. (Domnansen ibid: 5).

6. Complementarity: - as a concept, the relation between man and women in ruler ship as the case of Kushite royal women. The wife connected the king with his descendant sand mother provides the link to the past which is sacred. In every culture man and women are complementary components of the whole. Mother and wife of king express the continuum of renewal, the continuum of the king's office, guaranteeing the kingship. Without the female aspect, ruler ship would not function. (Lohwasser 74). Thus it is complementarity rather than hierarchisation in some societies.

7. Variety becomes an important part of the definition. The emphasis of variety has important implications for anyone trying to reason from material culture to gender: not to expect no set relationship between genders. Equally the relation between gender and material symbols will be subject to change. And there is no claim to universality in establishing connections. The system or society decides whether roles open to men and women respectively are overlapping or segregated. The variability in the definition of both the number of genders allowed in each society and their differing roles makes it clear that gender is not a universal (Andrew ibid:16,17) Cemeteries KDK presents similarities and suggests common roots based on material culture. Conversely they also indicate customs that vary from one cemetery to another with the same geographical area.

8. Female figurines reassessed: - Context has its vital importance; they are not isolated artifacts but products of particular societies. Meaning is not constant across context so we do not expect one uniform explanation. In the Sudan evidence support the idea that they had spiritual meaning from the beginning which led to religious role obtained by the Napatan royal women and consequently the Meroitic royal women (fig 4).

9. We have to bear in mind significant regional diversity as well as considerable change in practice over time. There is the problem of the ownership and use in life of grave goods.

10. Gender was and is certainly still the basic principle for the division of labor. In Sudan's modern societies, gathering is mainly female activity and women thus have a preponderant role in plant tending. They also tend to be responsible for pottery making, collection of fire wood and activities related to food preparation. Herding as well as hunting and fishing are typical male activities (Haaland 1987).
Bibliography: -

Bonnet, Ch, etal: 2005 *Kerma et Meroe: Cinq conference d'archéologie Soudanaise, Khartoum.*

Figures:

Fig 1. A-group grave. Edwards 2004 p.71
Fig 2. Sphinx of Shepenwept 11(Wildung 1997: 175)
Fig 3. Stela of king Nastasen (Wildung 1997: 236-237)
Fig 4. Neolithic female figurines (Wildung: 17-18)