
ARIES PHILIPPE, CENTURIES OF CHILDHOOD;

A Social History of Family Life

Translated from the French to Spanish by Naty Garcia Guadilla's prologue¹.

A Summary

by George N Njenga

1. The first refers to our concept of ancient traditional society

He holds that the ancient societies did not have a clear mental representation of the child and of the adolescent. That infancy was considered mainly that period of great fragility or otherwise referred to as the “mimoseo” when the child could not take care of itself. As soon as it could understand its surrounding the child was quickly include in the adult circles with whom he shared in work and play. He was considered a young adolescent. The practice of separating the child away from his parents from an early age and inserted into the adult youth group where he learned how to work on an apprenticeship system.

The old family system had as its main activities;

- the conservation of goods
- carrying out ordinary responsibilities or a particular office
- mutual help in times of crisis
- protection of honor or of life

¹ ARIES PHILIPPE, CENTURIES OF CHILDHOOD; A Social History of Family Life; Translated from the French to Spanish by Naty Garcia Guadilla's prologue

The family did not have an emotional or affective function though this did not mean that love was absent. What it meant was that sentiment was not an indispensable faculty of the family, survival was. Hence, the emotional or affective relationships and social communication was augmented outside the family circle, in a strong and affectionate social circle made up of neighbors, masters and servants, children and old people, men and women, where affection was not an obligation and conjugal relationships were watered down (the relationship was often termed by the French as socialization).

2. In the second proposition, Aries comments on the child in contemporary industrialized society.

There was a definitive transformation towards the end of the 17th Century. The school substituted apprenticeship as the main channel of education. As a result the child stopped living with the adults and learning how to work from them and was quarantined for a time before being thrown into the world of work. The seclusion took place in the school or college. This was a reformation stressed by the catholic, protestant and judicial reformations although it would not have been possible without the sentimental collaboration of families.

The family was converted into a home in which was found the obligatory affection between the spouses and between them and the children was made necessary. The parents also became very fond in following the child's education. As a result the family began organizing itself around the children and their professional life polarizing themselves from the previous system of social life. Hence, it is important to note that education during the adolescent stage of life was a very recent phenomenon.

3. Aries' analysis above has provoked several criticisms.

Among them is the criticism by A Besancon, who says that Naty has neglected modern psychology and J.L. Flandrin, who mentioned that he gave in to an over indulgence in the belief in the immutability of traditional psychology. However, Naty defends her analysis against these accusations by arguing that one cannot be a historian and a psychologist at the same time for one risks the mixing the two or possibly evolving a peculiar psychology away from the modern one. Besancon's accusation is that the child is a comparative term in which the modern and the traditional past are paralleled. However based on Davis' research this methodology of analysis would leave traditional concepts of childhood recalcitrant or stubbornly resistant to control. In short the methodology is difficult to manage.

According to Aries, historians have acknowledged the indifference to children given by the parents in the traditional society, shown by the infrequent portrayal of the child in paintings or diaries and authors like M Agulhon have emphasized the presence of social life or "sociability" in the same societies. Flandarin has accused Naty of being obsessed with the idea of "the origins". This, she says, is difficult to overcome since it is difficult to conclude, for example, when the artist in portraying the child as a small or miniature adult, does he do it to portray the existential or the sentimental affective concept of infancy? According to Aries the conclusion is that the child was understood as different from the adult simply from the perspective of physical size and strength - "a child who is a "dwarf" on the way to adulthood.

Davis N.Z. wonders why Aries does not concern himself with the concept of youth proposed by ethnographers who claim that the children and youth generally gathered to play and organized parties together according to age-groups. Aries replies that he agrees with the idea that preceding the Medieval Age there had been in the rural and oral cultures a communal organization of classes made up of age groups which underwent rites of passage which conformed to the concept of ethnographers. In these rural organizations of age groups, each age group had its peculiar function and

education was transmitted during initiations and participation within them. However, it seems that this culture never took firm roots and was always in a state of survival. It was later found in the very late Medieval Age.

During this time education changed and gave emphasis to transmission of knowledge and values through the practice of apprenticeship. In this practice the children were obliged to live among the adults who taught them skills and civility. This practice continued through the medieval ages until the 18th century and it naturally made the practice learning through age-groups lose its luster.

Nevertheless, age-group classifications have lived on in order to manage sexuality and for the purposes of organizing feasts. But, how can we then reconcile what was really a vestige of society with the quarantine of children for a time in boarding schools away from home?

We should have recourse to the ambiguity which the word youth encases. Aries poses certain issues which shed light on the how the term was used. He mentions that while Emperor Nero was 25 years of age Tacitus referred to his “robust youthfulness”. What was Nero’s age when Burrus died? And that of Conde in Rocroy; the age of war and the age when it was simulated? And the bravado? Here Aries makes a note that Mazarin’s nephew was only 15 years when he died courageously at the walls of Paris towards the Front².

He concludes that these youth groups in the very late Medieval Age were purely “youthful bachelor groups” in an epoch where the normal practice was late marriage and bachelors were forced to find a home among their kind. These groups did not imply age groups in either the ancient regimen or the ethnographic societies.

² Aries, P., *CENTURIES OF CHILDHOOD; A Social History of Family Life*; Translated from the French to Spanish by Naty Garcia Guadilla’s, quoting Dethant, G., *Mazarin es ses amis*, Paris, 1968

4. New Dimensions in Family Life

He proceeds to spell that there is a new indication that until the late 17th century societies tolerated infanticide upon which severe punishment was meted if found out. It was practiced in secret and often probably simulated as an accident. The children died stifled while in the bed of their parents with whom they slept and who did nothing to save or watch over them.

Aires raises the question of baptism in the Christian societies of the medieval age. From a Christian perspective everyone should have been baptized and they supposedly were. However, he, Aires maintains the proposition that most of the people were not in a hurry to be baptized and often forgot to have the children baptized during periods of grave difficulties. Hence he proposes that the people acted much like our contemporary lay. They baptized the children whenever they wanted. They did not over grief if the children died during intervals between the baptismal days.

The method of baptism often took the form of emersion of children in tin baths. Later the practice of aspersion was established. The clergy tried to pressurize the parents to baptize their children as soon as they could and to encourage it they increased the availability of baptismal rituals. The Mendicants seemed most responsible for encouraging baptism of infants as early as possible after their birth. The 14th century was particularly very important for the re-establishment of this practice. The number of children increased once more and this is the reason why Aires names his chapter corresponding to this period as “the discovery of infancy”- meaning that it is that period when the western society rediscovered the soul of the child and held it more important than the body.

Aires indicates that during this period there was an occurrence of miraculous resurrection of some children who had died without baptism. This occurrence seemed to have disappeared during the 16th and the 17th Centuries.

The ritual of child burials re-emphasizes the importance of the child rediscovered in the 14th century. Whereas in the first four centuries of the Christian era it is clear that there was child burial in the Roman Empire, this practice seemed to have disappeared until the 14th century. Concerning the practice of burial it seems clear that the child was often presented as a pure soul on the epitaph over his or her burial ground. This can be seen clearly on a 16th century (1590) tomb showing at a museum in Luxemburg where the child is wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Aires then turns to the fact that during the 15th century the western society began taking into account the intimacy of family life through the architecture of houses. He bases his argument much on the work of R.A. Goldthwaite³. The family of the “street, living in the public square, of collective existence, began creating an intimate family home somewhat shield or protected from the intrusion of outsiders. His argument is supported by the study of the Florentine palaces which changed from 13th and 14th century palaces which were constructed to encourage communal living in public much opposed to the palaces later which emphasized family intimacy which can be observed already in the 15th century. This family intimacy demonstrates that it is at this time that the child lives off being “anonymous”.

In Aires earlier works it was in the 18th Century when the ordinary family, from a French perspective, began once again retracting to an intimate family home away from the street, but R. A. Goldthwaite demonstrates now that in the 15th century this tendency could already be observed. Goldthwaite notes that this return to the housing architecture which supported intimate family life naturally encouraged family intimacy and was centered on the Woman and child.

³ Goldthwaite, Richard A., *The Florentine Palace as domestic Architecture*; *American Historical Review*, Vol. 77, October, 1972, pp. 977-1012.

Aires, stops his research commentary here and bewails the over emphasis on researching the family between the 16th and the 18th century ad *nauseum*. What he awaits eagerly for is the research by M. Manson on the children games, toys, and infancy during the antiquity period.

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