

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article2837>



XVI.10 The principle of morality in the Orient

- The Spirit of Law - Book XVI. How the laws of domestic slavery relate to the nature of the climate -

Publication date: jeudi 6 septembre 2018

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

XVI.10 The principle of morality in the Orient

In the case of multiplicity of wives, the more the family ceases to be an entity, the more the laws must connect those detached parts to a center ; and the more various interests are, the better it is for the laws to bring them back to a common interest.

This is accomplished principally by confinement. Women must not only be separated from men by enclosing the house, they must also be separated within this same harem, in such a way that they constitute a sort of individual family within the family. Whence derives for the women the whole practice of morality, of modesty, chastity, reserve, silence, peace, dependency, respect, and love ; in short, a general direction of sentiments towards the best thing in the world by its nature, which is unique attachment to one's family.

The women naturally have to fulfill so many duties which are proper to them that they cannot be separated enough from everything that could give them other thoughts, all those things we treat as amusements, and those we call business.

We find purer morals in the various states of the Orient in proportion to the stricter confinement of women. In the great states there are necessarily great lords. The greater means they have, the more able they are to keep the women strictly confined and prevent them from re-entering society. That is why women's morals are admirable in the Turkish, Persian, Mogul, Chinese, and Japanese empires.

The same cannot be said of the Indies, which the infinite number of islands and the situation of the terrain have divided into an infinite number of small states, made despotic by a large number of causes which we have not time to list here.

There, only the wretched loot, and only the wretched are looted. Those who are called great have but very small means ; those who are called wealthy scarcely have their subsistence ; the confinement of women cannot be so strict there, such great precautions cannot be taken to contain them : the corruption of their morals is beyond imagination.

It is there we see the point to which the vices of the climate, largely unfettered, can carry disorder. It is there that nature has a force, and modesty a weakness, beyond our understanding. In Patani [1] the lubricity of the women [2] is so great that the men are forced to fashion a certain apparatus to shield themselves from their enterprises. In that country the two sexes lose even their own laws.

[1] *Recueil des voyages qui ont servi à l'établissement de la Compagnie des Indes*, vol. II, part II, p. 196.

[2] In the Maldives, fathers marry daughters at age ten or eleven, because it is a great sin, they say, to let them suffer a need for men (*Voyages de François Pyrard*, ch. xii). In Bantam, as soon as a daughter is thirteen or fourteen she must be married if she is not to lead a dissolute life (*Recueil des voyages qui ont servi à l'établissement de la Compagnie des Indes*, p. 348).