

- The case of the natives of Yap shows that morality is sometimes dependent on the customs and conditions of a people.

THE CURIOUS SEXUAL ETHICS OF THE YAPS

The Yanks on Yap are having a hard time trying to decide what to do about Yap morals.

Yap is one of the Pacific islands formerly ruled by Japan and now a United State "trusteeship" supervised by the Navy.

Young naval officers stationed on Yap are having woman trouble. Quite impersonally, that is. The question is, should the "scandalous" ethics of this Polynesian-Melanesian people be allowed to continue under the American flag? Or would it be a mistake to impose American morals upon islanders whose traditions and training make them content with a system which, though it seems outrageous to us, is to them highly moral and proper?

Take a concrete case. Should premarital sexual re-

lations be banned? In Yap, a young man does not think of becoming engaged to a girl until she has demonstrated conclusively her ability to bear children. She, for her part, will not enter into a compact with a man until he has proved his power to make her pregnant. Childless marriages, therefore, are avoided.

The Yaps believe they have good reason for this custom. Forty per cent of Yap women are unable to bear children. This grim fact profoundly influences Yap morality. The man who wants a family wishes to be sure that his mate can give him children. And she wants to be sure about him. Thus promiscuity before marriage is encouraged.

The usual fear of society that such promiscuity will result in a large and uncared-

for illegitimate population does not apply in Yap, for the Yap people have been a dying race. The population has decreased steadily during Spanish, German and Japanese occupation of the sparsely inhabited isle.

A dying race frantically uses any methods or means which may increase the crop of babies. Sages in Yap council chambers instruct young men that their chief duty is to bring into existence a new generation.

Both the Japanese and their German predecessors tried to teach continence. But they were suspected of ulterior motives.

"They wanted to see us disappear," an old chief told me, "They wanted the islands for themselves. And so they got righteous and talked 'morality' to us."

Yap boys and girls begin testing each other before they have reached their teens. For the health of the girl, it is necessary that there should be a pause in this process while she is making the adjustments of puberty. To protect her during this pe-

riod the girl is sent to the *dopal*.

The *dopal* is the Women's House. It is a retreat, a place of refuge, a sort of prison. The men cannot get in and the women cannot get out.

Every girl at the beginning of puberty must remain for six or eight months in the *dopal* until she has reached full womanhood. During this time she must not stir from the vicinity of the *dopal*. She is a prisoner and an exile.

The *dopal* is merely a dark, damp, poorly-constructed thatch hut in some forlorn spot. Since men are not allowed near, it depends for repairs upon the women and suffers in consequence, for the women are not house builders. That is man's work, as woman's is taro-potato digging.

One *dopal* I saw was on a boggy islet in the midst of a mangrove swamp. I looked at it across a hundred feet of shallow water in which, at intervals, upright pegs were placed. These were to support planks to serve as a bridge. But these planks, like the drawbridge of an

ancient castle, were to be laid down only when someone desired to enter who had a right to do so.

The women were supposed to stay in the house. If one came out, perhaps to shout an entreaty that some food be sent, she would hide her face behind a screen made of woven palm leaves. Of course, food could be brought in only by women.

When the girl has become a woman the *mara-fau* (necklace of lemon hibiscus) is placed on her neck. It is a black knotted cord which hangs down both in front and behind. This marks her as marriageable and she may now return to mixed society.

But she is not done with the *dopal*. Every month she must flee the male and confine herself for five days or so in the *dopal*. Of course, the monthly departure of a married woman disrupts the household. During that period, and then only, custom permits the man to cook his own food. But he may not cook for his children. If they are too young to do for themselves, they must go to the *dopal* where their mother

will prepare their food. The man must never, even during his wife's absence, dig taro-potato. Such woman's work would forever disgrace him. He must have some other woman obtain it for him, or go without potatoes until his wife returns.

Engagement rarely takes place until relations have been carried on long enough to prove mutually satisfactory. Even after engagement the girl takes it for granted that her husband-to-be will continue to associate with her girl-friends, and she sees no cause for jealousy in this fact. She exercises equal freedom. Even after marriage, Yap ideas of courtesy require that she should give herself to other men when they request it.

The philosophy, right or wrong, behind such practices is that any means of increasing the population are warranted.

Children born out of wedlock are no problem because there are always homes of relatives or friends open to them. The question of their economic support does not arise in a land where cloth-

ing and shelter are simple matters, fruit hangs from the trees, and the sea is full of fish. Thus do circumstances alter morals.

How geography affects morals is seen in the change that has come over Yap during the last hundred years. In the old days mating was made difficult by a stiff marriage ceremony. The island was overpopulated and no more children were wanted; every additional mouth meant one more step toward starvation for the tribe. Therefore the moral leaders of the community, the medicine men, counseled abstinence.

Now the picture has changed and "morality" along with it. Marriage has been simplified and consists merely of taking a girl home. The marriage age is usually fourteen or fifteen.

If the child bearing ability of the wife has not been proved in advance, or if it fails after marriage, wives may be exchanged, permanently or temporarily, among relatives or friends in the hope that offspring will re-

sult from the new combination

Polygamy is rare. But a man whose brothers die inherits their wives. Thus if there are five brothers and all die but one, he finds himself with five wives. He is expected to keep up a high degree of pregnancy among them. If he loses power, some or all of them are transferred to other men.

Union between parent and child is forbidden. Also between brother and sister; and it is to prevent such union that the young man is expected to live in the All Men House, a sort of men's club, until marriage.

However, there are chiefs who favor consanguineous marriage as an aid in repopulating the island. They point to its success on Eauripik, a small isolated island east of Yap. There, they say, it worked.

So alien is this to most human experience, even among wild tribes, that I reserved a doubt on it until I could consult a recognized authority on these islands, an old and respected trader, During Spanish and German

as well as Japanese times he had lived in the islands and is the only foreigner to have made his home for a year on Eauripik.

"I don't attempt to explain it," he said, "but it's true. The people of Eauripik are usually big, strong, healthy people. They almost never become sick. Yet the entire population of 190 people is one family descended from one couple. All marriages are within the family. There is no mixture from the outside. Foreigners do not visit the island. It is off the usual trade routes. All the people look alike. Closest relatives marry. And yet the population is increasing slightly."

Of course, there are many other factors besides consanguinity to be considered. The hardihood of the original stock, the climate, the food supply, possible social restraints, and especially the absence of the white man whose liquors and diseases have brought an unhappy ending to the idyll of many South Sea peoples . . . all these things may have offset the effects of bloodrelationship. One can understand

the disquiet of some chiefs who wonder whether dying Yap is wise in keeping this apparently successful method of increase under taboo.

There is also taboo upon color-crossing. Marriage with a white man may be considered an honor by a Tahitian maiden. The Yap maiden would consider it a disgrace. "Black to black, white to white, red to red," so runs the Yap observed proverb.

Although sex taboos are lacking where they are most expected, they appear in odd places. The man who is about to go fishing must have nothing to do with his wife for at least twenty-four hours previous. The man who is going to another island (that is, outside the reef which encloses the Yap group) must not co-habit with his wife or anyone else for a month before he leaves, during his absence, or for a month after his return. Violation of this custom is supposed to bring disease and death.

Recently three kings of Yap were taken on a visit to Japan. It was assumed that, in common with other tired

businessmen, they might 'unbend their taboos a bit when away from home. But the gay districts of Tokyo and Osaka were viewed by the three kings much as they might have been examined by a deputation of professors of sociology. They were of academic interest only.

Pregnancy is the particular object of anxious superstition, because the pregnant woman is the potential savior of the race. Not only is she hedged about with rules and rites, but her husband is also.

A neighboring chief refused our offer of some choice bananas.

"I cannot eat them," he said. "My wife is going to have a child."

"Will what you eat affect your wife?"

"Of course. That is old wisdom among the Kanakas."

I asked what foods were forbidden nourishment to an expectant father.

"He must eat little of anything. Nothing to make unhappy stomach. And no bananas. No tortoise. No coconuts that have fallen from the tree. And if he, or wife, eats fish of many colors, very

bad! Baby will be spotted, many colors."

If the child is stillborn, it is the man's fault. He has somehow broken the routine prescribed for him. He is severely censured, perhaps before the council, for Yap cannot afford to lose babies.

There is no prostitution among the Kanakas of Yap. They are scandalized by the practice in the "civilized" world. They say that such things should be matters of free will, not compulsion.

The future of Yap morality is in doubt. Will contact with foreign ways bring in "civilized" prostitution? Or will the schools and hospitals of the Navy and the churches of missionaries succeed in tightening up the principles of family morality? Should strict regulations governing domestic affairs be established and enforced?

So far the Navy boys have been inclined to take a leaf from the book of other rulers in the South Seas far more experienced than the Americans. It has been the practice of the British, Dutch, and French not to interfere too drastically with native ways.

Where sudden changes in native mores have been imposed the result has too often been the destruction of the native people.

There is reason to believe that the situation on Yap will change as time goes on. The education and health programs of the Navy are having their effect. Infant mortality is decreasing and adults live to a greater age. The result is that the population, for the first time in

half a century, is growing. If this continues, the wise men of the tribes may change their counsel.

In the meantime, this curious example of the effect of geography and population upon morals is a phenomenon that can be studied to advantage by sociologists, theologians and others concerned with the motivations of human behavior. — *By Willard Price, from Everybody's Digest.*

WEDDING GIFT

The story is being told of a harassed husband how never seemed to be able to please his complaining wife. On their wedding anniversary she bought him two ties, one green, the other yellow. He thanked her profusely, but she sighed: "Well, I guess you don't like my gift." . . . "But, darling, I do. I'm mad about them. As a matter of fact, I'll prove it to you right now." He removed the tie he was wearing, put on the yellow tie and beamed: "There." His wife looked at him sadly and sighed: "Don't like the green, eh?" — *Leonard Lyons.*