

A Comparison of Tiwi and Dobe Ju/'hoansi Social Patterns

INTRODUCTION

Both the Dobe Ju/'hoansi of southern Africa and the Tiwi of northern Australia were hunter/gatherers when first encountered by western anthropologists. Even though their approach to subsistence was basically the same, many things about these two cultures are different. They differ with regard to marriage practices, residential patterns, social influence and succession, as well as in their views on men and women.

MARRIAGE

Marriages are arranged in both cultures, but the methods are quite different. Among the Ju/'hoansi, the parents of both the prospective husband and wife come to a mutual agreement about their children's marriage. Usually, the boy's mother approaches the mother of the girl first.

Tiwi marriages are arranged while the girl is quite young, often before birth. A deal is made between the father of the young girl (or the husband of the girl's mother, if the father has died) and the prospective husband. The father figure bestows the child to a promising or established man in the community, who is usually at least 30 years old.

The Tiwi practice of bestowing results in large age differences between a wife and her husband. They are almost never less than 25 years apart. Ju/'hoan wives are typically younger than their husbands, but only by 6 to 8 years. Ju/'hoan girls usually marry around age 12, while boys get married around the age of 18.

The rules for who can marry whom differ, as well. The Dobe have a system which divides all people in the social group into those with whom an individual is familiar (this is called a joking relationship), and those with whom an individual is formal (called an avoidance relationship). One may only marry a person with whom one can joke, and one that is the appropriate age. This rule is further complicated by another set of rules within their kinship system: A person who has the same name as someone with whom you are formal is also treated as formal, even if they would otherwise be in a joking relationship with you... and thus cannot be considered as a marriage candidate.

The rules for the Tiwi are quite simple by comparison: The prospective bride and groom must be from different matrilineal clans. Ideally, men are expected to marry the daughters of their mother's brother, but this is not always possible.

The marriage practices of the Dobe Ju/'hoansi and the Tiwi differ in yet another way: The extent to which men have multiple wives.

For the most part, the Ju/'hoansi are monogamous. less than 1 in 10 married men have more than one wife, and almost never more than two. The reason given for this by Richard Lee is that the women do not like polygyny.

The Tiwi, on the other hand, are perhaps the most polygynous culture in the world. Tiwi men begin collecting wives in their late twenties, and those who are successful add wives up until the time of their death. The first wives acquired by Tiwi men are usually post-menopausal widows. If young men are perceived as "up and coming" and might add prestige or power as a son-in-law, fathers will bestow their infant daughters to them as wives. the most successful Tiwi Men have been known to have twenty wives.

LOCAL GROUPS

In both cultures, the groups of people who live and work together are related to one another, but the ways in which these local groups are organized differ.

The Tiwi living unit is referred to as a "household" by Hart, et al., and are made up of a husband, his wives, their children, and occasionally others such as unmarried sons of the wives (from previous marriages), and visiting cousins. These groups usually numbered between 15 and 20, and make up the basic economic unit for the Tiwi.

The local group for the Dobe Ju/'hoansi was termed a "camp" by Richard Lee, and camps usually contained between 10 and 30 people. Bride service (where a new husband and wife move to live close to her parents and the husband works for them) was quite common, and lasted three or four years. After this period, deciding where to live was fairly pragmatic. Examples of all typical patterns (patrilocal, matrilocal, avunculocal, and neolocal) occur.

Although the population of a camp might be quite fluid, there is still a visible structure: The leaders of the camp are the most senior people, usually in both age and tenure. The camp itself does not own or control land (although each of these local groups had a habitual range throughout which they move), but the leaders (called K"ausi) are considered hosts of the water hole around which the camp centered its activities. Anyone from outside the camp always asks for the permission of the K"ausi before using the water hole. Every member of a camp was related to the K"ausi, either by blood or marriage.

POWER AND SUCCESSION

The Tiwi are very concerned with gathering influence and respect, while the Ju/'hoansi seem much less so.

Tiwi Men spend their entire adult lives planning, calculating, and maneuvering in an on-going game of gaining friends, respect, and influence. The path to success for Tiwi men

involves two basic strategies: 1. Marry a lot of women, and 2. control the marriages of women whom you cannot marry (i.e., your daughters, granddaughters, and your mother).

Women are the currency of the Tiwi economy. They are considered an asset to be used in the household, or invested for future returns. Sons are really of no use, but daughters are like gold. The more wives a man has, the more people there are to keep the household running smoothly. Wives gather food and cook, leaving the well-to-do Tiwi man with leisure time to create gifts he can present at parties he hosts for other influential men.

Tiwi men bestow their daughters to men whom they believe will bring prestige or influence, or who promise their own daughters in return.

He who dies with the most wives wins, but then the game is definitely over. The widows (assets) of a deceased head of household immediately remarry, diverted to other Tiwi men at his very graveside. Widows may marry his brothers, half-brothers, or associates. Or, if most or all of the deceased man's contemporaries are dead, a widow may marry a younger man who is a contemporary associate of her sons. The original household dissolves.

While the Dobe Ju/'hoansi seem relatively uninterested in wealth and power, they do look forward to gaining a certain influence as they grow older. Their complex kin systems often clash, and a method for resolving such conflicts was created. Even though the existing kinship systems already defined the relationship between two people as either "joking" or "avoidance," the older person has the right to redefine it. The elder can "wi" the younger person, which means they decide what the two shall call each other and how they shall act.

As people age, the number of people they can "wi" grows. A Ju/'hoan individual has reached the pinnacle when they can say that all those who "wied" them are dead, and they have "wied" everyone still alive. This privilege controls not only how those who do the "wissing" interact with others, but can have a great influence over who is eligible to marry whom.

The K"ausi who administer the water holes also have some influence and respect. They are the eldest people in the camp, and are only succeeded when they die or chose to move elsewhere.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

It appears that many of the differences discussed here between the Ju/'hoansi and the Tiwi can be correlated to a fundamental observation: Ju/'hoansi men and women are on a more or less equal footing, while Tiwi men run the show.

Tiwi marriage practices seem to be designed for the exclusive benefit of the men. Women have no choice about who they or their children marry (until they are much older and widowed) or how many co-wives they share a husband with. The high number of wives possessed by Tiwi men could be attributed to their belief that all females must be married (left they have a baby out of wedlock), or to the suppression of intra-Tiwi violence by arriving westerners, but it seems just as likely that this belief is perpetuated by Tiwi men for their own benefit. Among the Ju/'hoansi, women are generally opposed to polygyny (their views have prevailed for the most part), and share in the arranging of their children's marriages.

The trend of male dominance among the Tiwi continues when living arrangements are examined. Ju/'hoan camps may have men and women who serve as K"ausi, while the Tiwi household unit exclusively revolves around the head man.

Finally, when discussing Tiwi influence and succession, it becomes clear that it applies nearly exclusively to men. The only power a Tiwi woman might have is the ability to veto a remarriage after becoming widowed, and then only if she is old enough to have grown sons. While there is little to be handed down among the Ju/'hoansi, it is clear that both men and women can ascend to positions of respect and influence.