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*Tiwi of North Australia*

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While the idea of the Aborigine people shows up often in films or books, most people do not have a good idea of what the real culture is like and what the people do in daily life. C.W.M. Hart and Arnold R. Pilling have attempted to rectify this situation by co-authoring a book entitled, *Tiwi of North Australia*, which describes the cultural system of a particular group of Aboriginal people, the Tiwi. In this ethnography, the two explain how this culture lived during traditional times and what changes have been brought to it since increased contact with the outside world has occurred.

This book is unique in that the information and examples it contains come from two separate fieldwork experiences undertaken by two different anthropologists. C.W. M. Hart worked among the Twi during 1928 and 1929. His contributions to the book include describing the traditional way of life in the Tiwi culture. Pilling lived among the Tiwi in 1953-1954 and describes how Tiwi lifestyles have changed since the first missionaries arrived. It is interesting to note, that although they worked separately, most of their data is corroborated by the other's. This lends additional support the reliability of the book because the information comes from two independent sources. Both men immersed themselves in Tiwi culture during their fieldwork, in an effort to understand all aspects of it.

The first portion of the book describes the traditional patterns of daily life for the Tiwi. This group resides on two islands, called Melville and Bathurst, which are about twenty-five miles north of Australia. The Tiwi viewed this area as the center of the inhabited world and considered mainland Australia to be *Tibambinumi*, or the home of the dead. They also believed that they were the "real" people and reacted violently on the rare occasion that an outsider arrived on their islands. This phenomenon was also described in Chagnon's book on the

✓ Yanomamo; however, as discussed in class, most cultures are ethnocentric and believe that they are better than outsiders who don't belong to the same group.

The Tiwi lived in isolated groups most of the time. The most important level of organization was the band, which usually consisted of between 100-300 people. There were nine bands on the islands, with each having a particular area that they hunted and lived in, although there were not sharp lines between separate bands. Before outside contact, the average Tiwi would view the band as the most important social unit to which he belonged. After outside contact, the idea of belonging to the Tiwi tribe became even more important. However, most of the time they spent living in smaller household units.

In chapter 1, Tiwi marriage is described. The central idea of their marriage system is that all females must be married regardless of age. This is because they believed a spirit could impregnate a woman at any time and that if females were married their entire lives, there would never be a fatherless baby. Thus, both female infants and old women had to have a husband at all times. The father of the pregnant woman had the right to betroth the infant to another man and this was used to get something in return. For example, he might give the girl to a man he wanted to be allies with or to someone who he thought would be able to help him in old age. There was usually at least thirty years age difference between the husband and wife. Because of the age difference, the husband often died before the wife. The widow would then have to remarry, but often had more autonomy with the decision, although her adult sons would help. As with the ✓ Yanomamo, older women had more respect and more choice regarding their own lives.

An interesting impact of the remarriage of women was the renaming of their children. The husband had the opportunity to name the children, but when he died, the names he had given them became taboo. Thus, the new husband had to come up with new names for the children.

Usually names became permanent once the children had become adults because people were most used to those names. The Yanomamo also had name taboos after a person died, but their taboos did not extend to the children of the deceased, making the taboos more rigorous in Tiwi culture. However, the practice of name taboos made it difficult for ethnographers to collect genealogies in both cultures. The levirate was sometimes practiced, in that the brother of a dead husband often had the first choice in remarrying the widow, although this was not automatic. Sororate was more common in that by betrothing all of his daughters to the same man, the father was more assured that there would be a successful relationship between the two families, if something happened to one of the daughters.

The Tiwi also practiced the cross-cousin marriage system, which was also the bifurcate merging system. This was similar to aspects of both the Yanomamo and Netsilik cultures, but not exactly the same. As mentioned earlier, Tiwi girls were promised in marriage before or shortly after birth. This is similar to the Netsilik practice of early engagements due to a shortage of females eligible for marriage; however, the Netsilik practiced the lineal marriage system. The lineal marriage system was also practiced in the Zapotec culture as well as in our own. The Yanomamo system was more similar to the Tiwi one because they also used bifurcate merging and girls were promised in marriage to a specific man at a young age. The cross-cousin marriage system was an ideal that was not always carried out, because female children had become such assets to their fathers that the rules had to be bent a little in order to reap the greatest benefits. This is similar to the Yanomamo practice of changing kinship assignments in order to create more potential marriage partners for the family. While both systems had strict rules that were to be followed, this was not always practical in real life and stronger individuals often got away with bending the rules to their benefit.

Chapter 2 describes the basic routine of daily life. While the band was the central living unit, it was also a very fluid and changing arrangement. People would switch bands due to marriage or even the prospect of it. This made the household more important because this was where food production occurred and it was necessary to be a part of a household in order to eat. The women would spend the day scattered across the bush, where they would gather various plants and vegetables. It was vital that a household include one older woman because she had the most experience in collecting food and could supervise the younger wives. Thus, the oldest wife was usually considered to be the household manager and had free rein in food preparation. The young men would spend the day hunting animals such as kangaroos and various fish. Because the older men had bad eyesight, they could not hunt, but often spent their days making various ceremonial or decorative items. Overall, bigger households were better off because they had more people who could go out hunting and gathering. A man became wealthy by having more wives who could go collect food for him and was one of the reasons that polygynous marriages were made. Occasionally, there were ceremonies that drew large groups of people together, but for the most part, the daily life of the Twi was quite isolated and routine.

Chapter 3 deals with the prestige and influence system. This has already been touched on above. Becoming a “big man” was a very slow process that required a lot of political maneuvering over a long period of time. The most concrete symbol of being successful man was the possession of surplus food because this meant that the man could hold gatherings and still have time for his own social and political activities. The only way to get surplus food was to have a large number of wives in the household who could gather this food each day. This meant that women were the final “currency” that was essential for a man to be successful. Because of the betrothal system, a man was not really considered for marriage until he was in his thirties and

would not have the chance to start building up his own household until he was older. It was also the older men who essentially decided which of the younger men would be their successors in power and influence.

Chapter 4 explains some aspects of Tiwi collective life. Because of the polygynous system of marriage, many of the young men were left without wives and thus many charges of adultery were brought up against them. The chief way to deal with accusations of sexual indiscretion against a young man was through the duel. Here, the old man and the young accused faced each other in a circle of spectators. The accuser would then detail all of the instances in which he or his kinsmen had helped the younger man and how the younger man had “repaid” him for his generosity by having an affair. The old man then would throw spears at the young man, who dodged the first few and then allowed himself to be mildly wounded. Of course, not all duels were handled like this because in many cases the young man decided not to allow the older one to win. Then, other older men would come to the aid of the accuser, but no one would come to help the defendant. If the defiance continued, the young man was often killed. Occasionally, this dueling behavior could be broadened into what could be termed “warfare,” but remained obvious that the fights were still occurring between individuals over individual disputes.

This chapter also explained the major aspects of Tiwi religious activity. There were three main parts to this: day-to-day taboos, death-related rituals, and initiation ceremonies for young men. It is important to note that magic was not a part of their religious system. The authors hypothesized that this is because the Tiwi found their environment to be non-threatening and they didn't have to deal with hostile neighbors, so magic was not needed. However, taboo was very important. The generic term for something that was sacred or forbidden was *pukimani*. It could happen to a person after a particular event in their life, such as during mourning, during

initiation, or after childbirth. The names of children named by the deceased became *pukimani* as did the names of the deceased themselves, which is a quality also shared by the Yanomamo. ✓

*Pukimani* was not something that people actively sought out, but instead just happened to them regardless of their wishes. They were very careful to follow the expected rituals, lest something bad happen to them or their households.

The most elaborate rituals had to do with death. While the dead body was buried within twenty-four hours of death, the mourning ceremony did not occur until later. Because the mourners were *pukimani*, they could not participate in any part of the burial and instead had to rely on non-mourners (non-relatives) to do the work for them. This resulted in the mourners being in debt to those who had helped them and gave a hold over them by the non-mourners.

✓ The Netsilik also had cultural practices that led to “indebtedness” among individuals. For example, they had a seal-sharing partnership, in which each family involved got a specific part of the seal. This resulted in more trust between unrelated people and gave a sort of safety net by ensuring that food was shared. They also had song partnerships and wife-sharing partnerships. While these did not necessarily lead to indebtedness, they achieved the same aim of increasing cooperation among different people. The Yanomamo also maintained a continuous imbalance of who had given gifts or held a feast the last time, so that the other group would be required to return the favor and give gifts or hold a feast of their own. Overall, the purpose of these various practices for these groups was to maintain a fairly egalitarian society and to create more ties between unrelated people, thus creating trust and protection for all. For the Tiwi, the mourning ceremony varied depending on the status of the deceased. “Big men” had the largest ceremonies. Their ceremonies also took place quite a while after death because it took longer to get all of the

preparations ready. If the family did everything right by relying on others for favors and paying for a decent funeral, the state of *pukimani* would be removed after the ceremony ended.

Finally, initiation was important for boys. It was a very elaborate undertaking, with the boys entering it around age fourteen and not being fully initiated until around age twenty-four. Usually, the responsibility of teaching them was given to the men who were betrothed or married to the boys' sisters. The boy then went and lived with the men outside his family unit and was taught all that a grown man should know. Much of this teaching had to do with ritual observation. There were also periodic public ceremonies to mark the passage of one level to the next. A Tiwi was not a real man until he had completed this lengthy initiation. Girls did not have a similar initiation ceremony.

Chapter 5 gives a brief history of the Tiwis' experience with outside contact. During the early twentieth century, the Tiwi became less isolated as missionaries moved onto the islands. Chapter 6 shows how the Tiwi culture has changed since the introduction of outsiders. One of the biggest changes had to do with the marriage patterns. With the introduction of Catholicism, monogamous marriages were seen to be better than polygynous ones. The missionaries were able to weed out marriages between people of vastly differing ages and child betrothals, along with polygyny. These changes have led fewer women to become widows with their first marriages also lasting longer. That said, the Tiwi still kept parts of the old system and used marriage as a way to increase prestige among their peers. Bride price and bride service became important aspects of marriage. As of the time the book was written, the normal marriage pattern consisted of a woman choosing her potential husband from a group of single, similarly-aged men. Her father then informed the husband of the bride price and bride service that he was expecting. Thus, women continued to be used to enhance family status.



Modern life also led the Tiwi to become less nomadic and to instead congregate around one of four European establishments, where centralized villages developed. While polygyny is no longer practiced, large households remain because they tend to be made up of extended families. These extended families still function in largely the same manner. The women go out to gather food, the old women watch the children, the young men go out to get trade goods, and the oldest male is the “boss” who is wealthy and has much leisure time. The Tiwi have also switched from a patrilineal focus to a matrilineal one. The ethnography concludes its study of Tiwi life by describing some Tiwi who have gone on to become integrated into white, Australian society.

The stated purpose of this book was to describe the traditional lifestyle of the Tiwi culture and to show how outside influence has changed that culture. These aims were accomplished and after reading the book, I felt that I had a much better grasp of Tiwi cultural life. I felt that there was a good combination of facts and anecdotes and that the ethnography was very easy to read because I was interested in the way the culture was portrayed. In terms of the other cultures that we have studied this semester, I felt that the Tiwi were most similar to the Yanomamo. This is because both groups had clear roles for men and women, in which the men hunted and the women gathered and gardened. Women also seemed to be at the center of actions taken by members of the group. For the Yanomamo, this occurs during raids and for the Tiwi, ✓ the more women who are able to gather for the family, the more successful the family will be. It also seems that these two cultures were the ones most impacted by outside involvement. The authors also did a good job of describing their research and some of the problems they encountered. One issue was the difficulty of getting genealogies due to the frequent name changes and subsequent taboo on the old names. This is similar to Chagnon’s difficulties in gathering Yanomamo genealogies because of the name taboos. The authors were more than

observers—they became participants by being involved in the kinship system. This probably allowed that better access to various activities and ideas, which allowed them to write a more detailed book.

One of the biggest parallels that I noticed between the Tiwi today and other cultures who have been contacted by the outside world, particularly missionaries, was the overall impact of change on the society. This contrasts with the book on the Yoruba, in which Bascom says that European contact is overemphasized. The pattern that seems to take hold is that a mission is established and the locals eventually settle around it because they can get goods from the missionaries that could not be obtained elsewhere. Eventually, the group becomes completely dependent on the missions. Family structure is also changed in these cases because polygynous marriage is exchanged for monogamous Christian marriages. This was seen in the Netsilik and Yanomamo communities, along with the Tiwis. This is not to say that society is completely disrupted because many of the daily activities remain the same, but that the overall patterns of life have changed drastically.

In conclusion, this book provided a good introduction to the Tiwi culture. The Tiwis live on two islands and used to be a very isolated group that was hostile to outsiders. The band was the most important social unit, but people could still move from group to group. The Tiwi were a polygynous society in which a man could attain high status by having many wives because this allowed his family to have a lot of food and be able to host gatherings. There were a couple of unique attributes associated with the marriage system. All females had to be married, even infants and old women and the dominant male in the family was able to use this to his advantage by making alliances. Also, when a husband died, his children's names became taboo and new ones had to be found. While magic was not a part of their religious system, there were numerous

taboos that had to be observed at various points in a person's life. There were also elaborate initiation rites for young men that lasted over a series of years. Today, the Tiwi have become less nomadic and have shifted to a more westernized lifestyle. It was interesting to see the perspective of another culture and to see how greatly cultures can influence each other.