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Changes of the Family Life in Uruwa Valley, Papua New Guinea

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ZMĚNY V RODINNÉM ŽIVOTĚ V ÚDOLÍ URUWA, PAPUA-NOVÁ GUINEA

ABSTRAKT Předmětem studie jsou změny v rodinném životě ve vybraných komunitách v údolí Uruwa, Papua-Nová Guinea (Provincie Morobe). Studie je založena na terénním výzkumu, který autor uskutečnil ve vesnici Yawan v letech 2009 a 2011.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA rodina; příbuzenství; svatební zvyky; sociokulturní změna

ABSTRACT The objective of the paper is a presentation of the changes of family life in the selected communities of Uruwa valley, Papua New Guinea (Morobe province). The paper is based on a research the author carried out in the Yawan community (2009, 2011).

KEY WORDS family; kinship; wedding rules; sociocultural change

The Yawan community is located in the upper Uruwa valley of the Finisterre Range (see map), which is a remote part of Papua New Guinea (PNG). Although the people of upper Uruwa have been in contact with Europeans ever since the end of the twenties of 20th century, anthropologists paid only a partial attention to these communities. The only anthropologically relevant survey in this part of PNG was exercised by a missionary, Ursulla Wegman. In 1990, she published *Yau Anthropology Background Study* by SIL (Wegmann 1990).

My article focuses on the Yawan village and surrounding villages Toweth and Koteth (see fig. 1). In my article, I refer to all of these settlements as Yawan or Uruwa. Yawan is a part of YUS Conservation Area, which was the very first protected area under the Conservation Areas Act from 1978 (Tree Kangaroo Conservation Program Annual Report, 2009, 2010, 2011; Montgomery – Bishop 2006). The establishment of the YUS contributed to a more intense contact of the local people with outside world, especially with American and European scientists. They come to study biodiversity and tree kangaroos in particular. The Yawan community is based on patrilineal clans and apply patrilocal rule of postmarital residence, but under the various sociocultural changes the latter shifts.



Map 1. Location of Yawan community. Author: Jan D. Bláha.



Fig. 1. Yawan village. Author: Martin Soukup.

Under the influence of Christianity, the local people combine traditional customs of social life, native wedding rituals as well as post-marital rules with Christian ideas, which are unfortunately mutually incompatible. Moreover, in the studied communities of the upper Uruwa valley two denominations coexist – Lutherans and Adventists. The symbiosis is not smooth because these two denominations have been in conflict for more than forty years. A recent religious conflict divided the community, and the cooperation and contacts between the clans or the families was inhibited. Religious schism and conflict inside the community is currently rather latent because the local people tried to deal with this conflict during a big reconciliation ceremony, which I witnessed in 2009. The social climate indeed calmed down, but its latency still affects the daily life of the people (Soukup 2010).

Lutherans and Adventists have different attitudes to the local customs, such as marriage and related issues of wedding rules, post-marital residencies and bride-price (*oretno*). Due to the intermarriages between Lutherans and Adventists, people face many problems arising from these different attitudes and praxis. In the past, bride-price was a typical custom for communities across Melanesia (Mantovani 1992; Soukup 2012a). Nowadays, some Uruwa people break away from this custom. Mostly Adventists refuse bride-price. They argue that bride-price breaks the Christian ethics. On the contrary, many Lutherans

keep this wedding custom; they see the bride-price as an important part of their culture.

This incompatible perception of the bride-price has far-reaching consequences to the wedding habits and family life. This is evident especially in the case of marriage joining Lutheran and Adventist families. This type of marriage in Uruwa is not an exceptional one. I illustrate this pattern by a fictional story, which is based on real facts and sometimes happens. When a Lutheran young man is engaged to an Adventist girl, his family negotiates about the bride-price. The parents of the fiancée may reject bride-price, at the same time they may agree with the marriage. However, the bride's parents insist on their daughter and husband living with them. Consequently, they break the established patrilocality rule, and in fact they apply unorthodox matrilocality. The argument is that the girl belongs to the father, not to the husband, because the latter did not pay the bride-price. A second consequence is that daughters of the new couple will belong to the father-in-law, not to the father. The reason is the same – the father did not pay the bride-price. In the native view, bride-price is a compensation for both the girl's workforce and expenses, which her parents invested. We can expect that these attitudes may affect the future migration process in the region as well as population dynamics. The family life is changing not only concerning religious ideas, the economy, but also undergoes some changes.

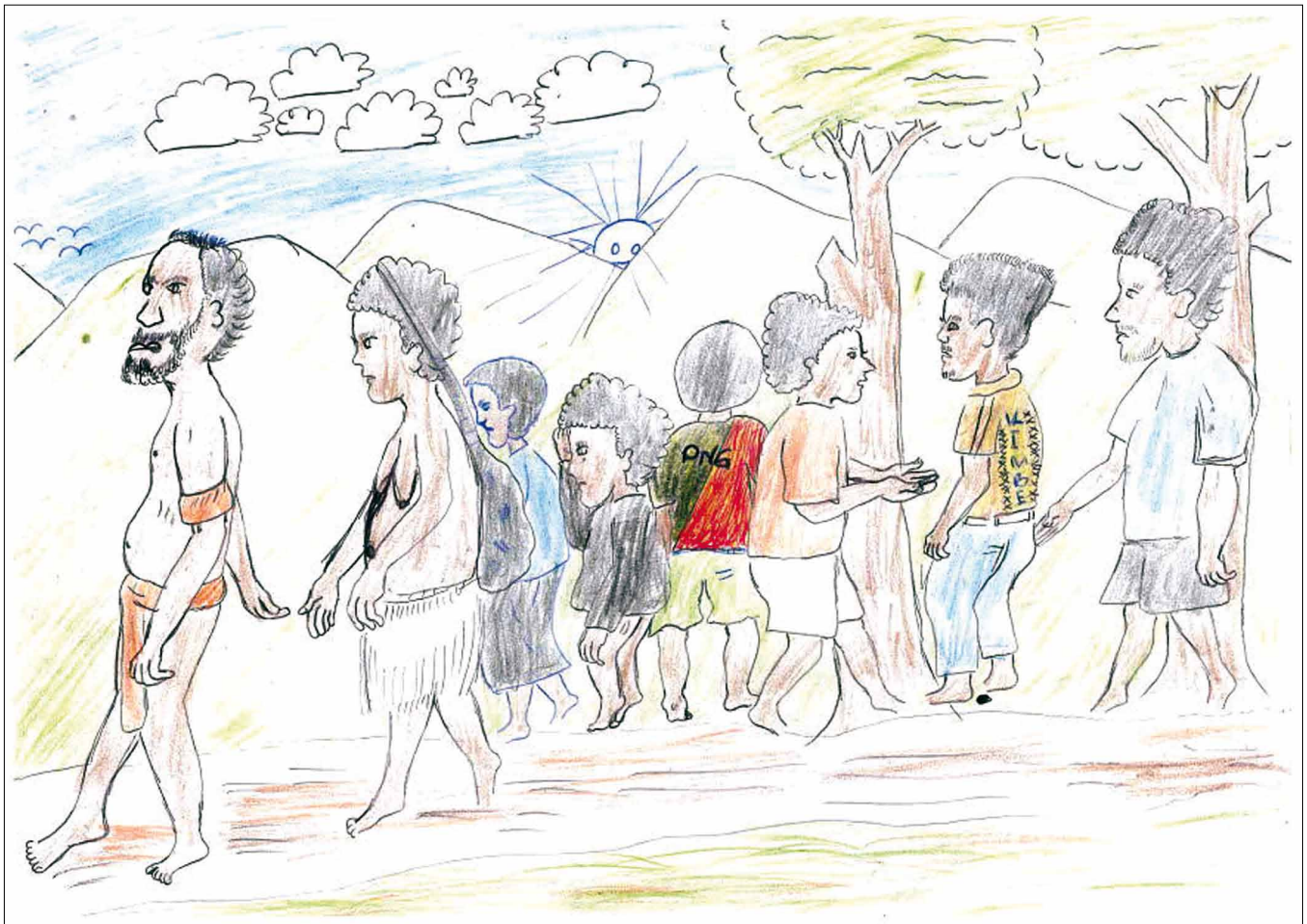


Fig. 2. Family by sixteen year-old boy.

During the fieldwork I collected drawings related to the society and culture (cf. Soukup 2011; Soukup 2012b). I gathered about one hundred and fifty drawings, which were created by pupils of the elementary school in Yawan (the age 13–20). I see these drawings as external representations (Sperber 1996), which can serve to detect current patterns of the family life in the selected communities of the Uruwa valley. I collected twelve drawings depicting family in total. All the authors visualized their family and provided descriptions of their drawings. As a whole, the collection reveals that family life is undergoing considerable changes. Most of the authors pointed out distribution of labor in the family, obedience to the parents, responsibilities parents have over the children. Nowadays, Uruwa communities are becoming part of the monetary economy of the PNG. Many local people depend on the monetary system because they need money to pay high school tuition. Adults highly evaluate education because they see it as a promise of prosperous future for their children. That is why some authors point out that Papuan people no longer depend on gardening as in the past. Local men and women try to develop different type of business. For example, one woman sews and sells clothes in Western style, one man opened a canteen. A local teacher builds ponds with the students in

order to farm and sell fish. Many men participate in the coffee business. All these activities transform family life regarding distribution of labor and traditional social life patterns, because some men have to travel in order to do the business. More future changes can be anticipated when it comes to monetary economy and employments. This expectation could be recognized from the interpretation of the drawings, in which authors expressed their visions of their own ambitions and future of the villages in Uruwa. Boys want to be pilots, doctors or scientists. Girls want to be nurses. All of them want to work to serve their community. These students dream about their future full off cell phones, roads, cars, bicycles, tap water, permanent houses and people living blessed lives, because they will have many useful things (Soukup 2012b).

The communities in the upper Uruwa valley are on the edge between today's and traditional way of life as the local people call the pre-contact situation of their culture. The visual narration of this pattern can be observed in the drawing made by a sixteen year-old boy (see fig. 2). In the drawing, the author portrayed his five siblings and parents. All children wear a T-shirt and trousers. Parents' clothes are in pre-contact style. The father is dressed in tapa cloth, and he is wearing an armband; the mother is wearing a grass skirt and she is

carrying a string bag (or *bilum* in Tok pisin). The author commented his drawing with these words: “My mother and father, they wear traditional clothes. It represents that our culture continues.” It is like an incarnation of the preamble of the PNG Constitution: “We, the people of Papua New Guinea... pledge ourselves to guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now.”

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