The right to a family environment in Pacific Island cultures

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The preamble of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the family as the "fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children." Familial forms and practices vary with culture and, therefore, programs to implement the Rights of the Child will need to address cultural issues. The purpose of this article is to examine these cultural issues, with an emphasis on the family, in Pacific Island cultures.

The Pacific Islands - places of dreams of idyllic living, warm climate, gentle breezes, friendly people, and a relaxed tempo. Many of us have shared the fantasy and desired the experience. Many others, especially youth born and raised in the Pacific Islands, share a different dream, a dream of leaving the Islands for modern conveniences, fast food, education, employment, and life in the fast lane. To understand how dreams can be nightmares, we need to consider the health problems, boredom, lack of opportunities, feelings of insignificance, and loss of belonging. Many cultures have changed sufficiently to make it difficult for youth to find a future in tradition and yet have not changed sufficiently to compete with the opportunities possible elsewhere.

Still, there are islands with excellent opportunities (Saipan, Guam, Hawaii), functioning traditional cultures (Yap, much of Papua New Guinea, many outer islands), remarkable beauty (Palau, Tahiti, Hawaii), and one with one of the highest per capita incomes in the world (Nauru). The diversity of the islands make accurate generalizations rare. There are about 1000 cultures among the Islands of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, with Polynesian cultures the most similar, Micronesian cultures different in the southeastern, western and central areas, and Melanesian cultures the most diverse (Oliver, 1989).

An example of the diversity may be helpful. Oliver (1989) notes that no domain of behavior encompasses wider differences than sexual activity. Certainly that is true of island traditional cultures, in which there were many examples of polygyny, and examples of polyandry (Marquesas), incest (Hawaii, where the brothers and sisters of the highest social class were permitted to marry to increase the divinity of the family), and eriam, an arrangement where two husbands shared sexual access to each other’s wives (Wedau) (Oliver, 1989). In Tahiti, most people “copulated frequently, pleasurably, and almost openly, a penchant reflected in their every day convention, their public entertainments, and their myths” (Oliver, 1989, p. 53); while among the Mae...
Enga of Papua New Guinea, "sexual intercourse was generally considered to be debilitating and magically dangerous, especially for males, whose fear of the pollutive effects of menstrual blood approached paranoia" (Oliver, 1989, p. 53).

In Tonga, sex was a taboo topic of conversation and a young married couple had an "instructor present from the mother's side of the family who instructs the couple on the act of intercourse. At times the instructor is present during the act to insure that all goes well. This type of sex education suggests that sex is a purely functional aspect of life" (Puloka and Palafox, 1980, p. 229). In some cultures of Melanesia, "a community's young men went through a year's-long period of group-organized homosexual activity before 'graduating' to the status of adult and marriage-ready men (such practices usually were believed necessary for promoting their maturation and growth)" (Oliver, 1989, p. 57).

All of these practices, of course, were regulated by the norms of the culture. There were occasions in many cultures, however, in which violations of these norms were permitted. "Such violations ranged from general but furtive spouse swapping to unbridled public orgies. The kinds of events that, here or there, occasioned them included mass visits from other communities; accomplishment of some community enterprise, such as a fish-drive or battle; death of a chief, and religious ceremonies containing fertility themes" (Oliver, 1989, p. 57). For example, the Arioi, a religious cult in Tahiti, were known for their promiscuity, the explicit nature of dance and theater performances that they gave, and the sexual activities that accompanied their tours. Ah, such diversity!

Accurate generalizations are made rare not only by the diversity of traditional cultures, but also by the diversity of changes since European contact began in 1521 when the Spanish, lead by Magellan, landed on Guam. The first encounter, on March 6, did not go well. Some of the Chamorros took a small boat and Magellan's crew retaliated by burning 40–50 houses and killing 7 men (Alkire, 1972). It was downhill from there: Island populations were decimated by new diseases, British sailors from a whaling vessel killed all of the adult men on the island of Ngatik and moved in with the women in 1867 (Poyer, 1993), the United States overthrew the monarchy in Hawaii in 1893, and American nuclear testing from 1946 to 1958 contaminated Bikini, Eniwetok, Rongelap, and other atolls in the Marshall Islands, leaving a legacy of miscarriages, cancer, and "jellyfish babies."

The traditional cultures were affected by the influence of the Spanish and Portuguese in the sixteenth century, the Dutch in the seventeenth, the English and French in the eighteenth, the British, French, and Americans in the nineteenth, and the Germans, Japanese, and Americans in the twentieth. To examine the right to a family environment in 1000 traditional cultures, as influenced by European and American cultures in the past few centuries, is not possible. Fortunately, I have a limited number of pages to do so.

To understand the meaning of the right to a family environment in the Pacific