

The Christian Polygamists of West Irian

This is my first wife, Magai Kepo, and this is my other wife, Ijaaj."

Bill was shocked. Emotions raced around in his heart. A few minutes earlier in the church service this man Mote had stood out as an impressive Christian. Oh, he didn't look different from the pagan Papaukus. Like the rest he wore nothing but necklaces and a penal sheath. But he prayed so earnestly. Even though Bill could not understand every word, he felt that here was a man who knew God. But now . . . two wives! He was a polygamist!

It was curious. Long before leaving for his mission assignment in the cold highlands of West Irian (formerly Dutch New Guinea) Bill had heard that polygamists were admitted into the church in that field, though not into church leadership. Yet somehow he was not prepared emotionally for this moment. The most disturbing thing was that Mote seemed to be such a spiritual person.

In the weeks to follow, Bill learned more about Mote and his wives. As was the custom, Mote lived with his older sons in the men's section of his home. Each of his wives had her own room at the back, completely separated from the men's quarters, and accessible only by an outside doorway. For daily family prayers, Mote and his two wives met on a log outside the home. Passing by, Bill often heard them praying fervently for their pagan friends, and saw Mote, children at his side, haltingly reading the New Testament to his double family. After morning devotions the two wives would set off down the trail to their sweet potato gardens, chatting happily together.

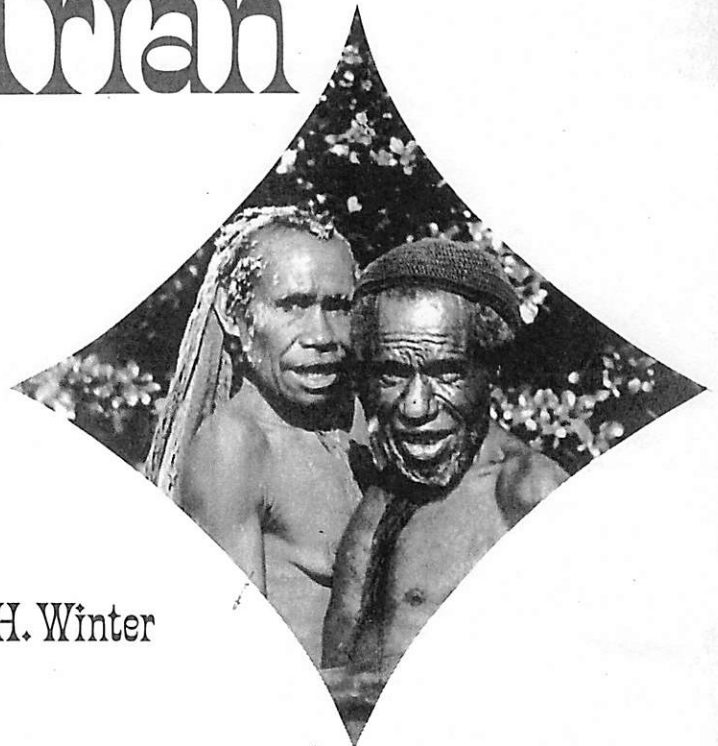
An older missionary said, "You should have seen Mote when I first

by Roberta H. Winter

came here. He was very much a pagan. He wasn't married yet, but he already had a reputation for fierceness in the ghastly intertribal wars that used to be so frequent. About two months after I came, the village chieftan wanted to take Mote's sister as his fourth wife. But, as is often true, the girl didn't want to be the fourth wife of an older man. She had already picked out a boy whom she wished to marry. Mote was furious. Since he as the brother would receive the bride price, he insisted that she marry the wealthy older man. She tried to run away three times, and in exasperation Mote finally shot her in the leg with a bow and arrow."

"Does that sort of thing still go on?" Bill asked, shocked.

Roberta H. Winter, who has worked as a missionary with primitive people in Central America, gathered information for this account directly from the people involved. Names of persons and some of the events have been shuffled, but all other details are authentic.



"Yes, it's quite common," was the reply.

"But look at Mote now," Bill thought. Seated there with his children, he was the picture of benevolence. "Could he have shot an arrow into his sister's leg? I can't believe he would ever allow one of his sons to treat a sister this way. That is one thing the gospel has changed."

Bill soon learned that although Mote did not now use arrows, he still could be forceful. Recently one of the believers named Pigome took a second wife. Pigome was already married to a Christian girl, and the couple seemed very content. But lately he had bought and cleared a large new tract of land to plant in sweet potatoes. Under the old pattern, if he bought more land, he would also have to buy another wife to till it. Raising more sweet potatoes meant he could feed more pigs to sell for more cowrie-shell money. More money would enable him to get still more land — and wives. This was the sure way to prestige and authority.

Mote, however, even though he could not become an elder in the church due to his plural marriage, spoke strongly to Pigome, reproving him for taking a second wife. After the church disciplined the man, it was chiefly Mote's influence which caused even the village to pursue a sort of ostracism against him. Bill smiled to see Mote and his two wives so stirred up about someone else taking a second wife. One day he asked Mote why he felt so strongly about it when he himself had a plural marriage.

"But you see, I married my second wife before I knew it was not God's plan. Pigome knew better. He has done wrong. Even the village knows it's wrong."

The missionaries might actually have been inclined to be more lenient simply because of the apparent contradiction. It was interesting to Bill to see a church established just twenty years ago among stone-age, cannibalistic people making decisions of right and wrong based solely on what they understood God's law to be. Not a single one of the younger marriages among Christians was polygamous. A skeptic could have said that the young men couldn't afford

two wives yet, but a subtle change had taken place in the whole village. For one thing, they no longer seemed to feel that leadership required several wives. Furthermore, they recounted to Bill again and again tales of bloody battles which had started because of problems arising in a polygamous household. There were now other ways than through polygamy to gain status in the community.

Bill knew just how important that status was to a Kapauku. He knew that to gain prestige, it had been necessary to be wealthy. And he knew that the only way wealth could be achieved depended on the labor of more than one wife. He wondered how the young men could now gain status if they never intended to marry more than one girl.

Mote had no answer for this question. Nevertheless Bill noticed that the village council had gradually accepted more and more men who were monogamous. Evidently the village, now 80 percent Christian, had evolved an alternate system of gaining prestige. But what was this system?

Bill watched for months, but found no definite answer. One day, as he sat on a log watching the headman deliver

a political speech, the answer came to him with a jolt. What factor other than wealth was always part of the picture in choosing a leader for the village? It was oratory. The real leaders all knew how to influence people with words. All of them could speak with power. A man was often excluded from a leadership role simply because he did not have this gift.

What had the church done? It had taught men to read and to write. It had also taught them to preach, and week by week they developed their skills as they spoke sometimes to thousands of people at a time. The church had also taught these church leaders how to understand the spiritual problems of the people. Now these men with this new kind of experience were the ones in demand in the village councils! Not many of them were wealthy. None had more than one wife. But they did fulfill the other basic requirement for status and leadership. In some cases it even seemed that these church leaders had gained more respect than the wealthy headman himself.

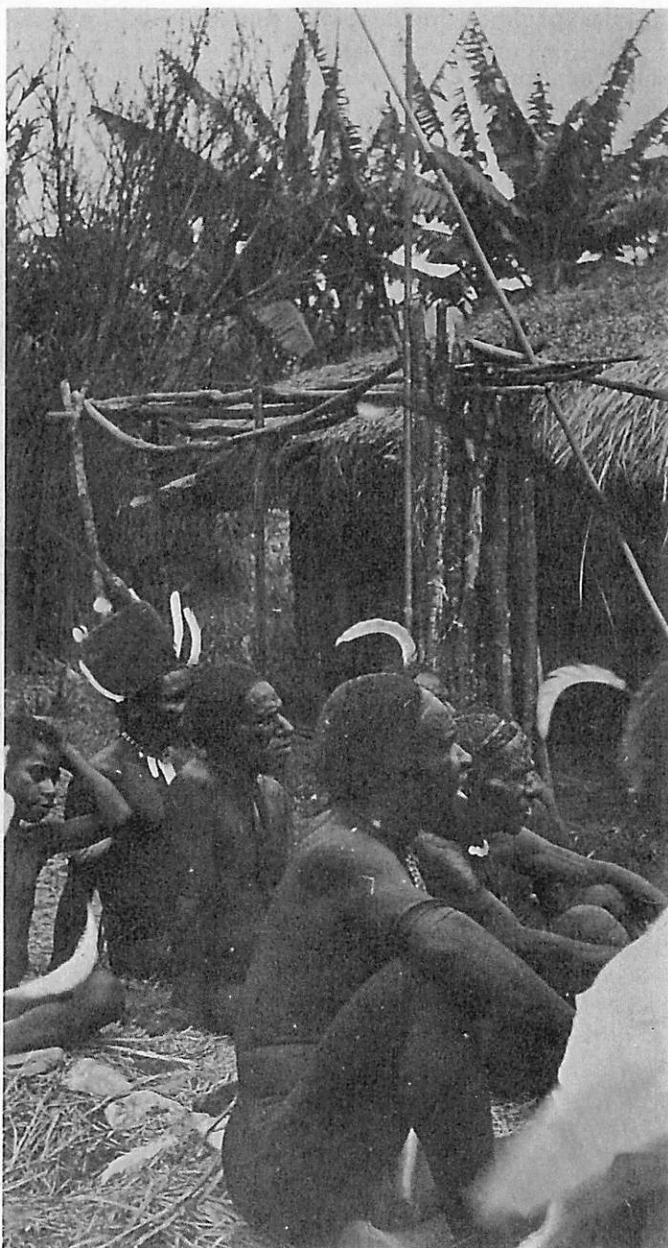
There was the case of Ij Jok, the chief in the village where Bill lived. At the time a large "people movement"



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brought almost the whole village into the church, Ij Jok had been baptized with his two wives. He had always been highly respected and loved by the people. But several years after his baptism he added a third wife. He was put under discipline by the church. The new wife attended church, but was not accepted by the church members as a real believer, and her husband lost even further respect when he refused to return her to her home. Two months after Bill arrived in West Irian, this same man took a young girl as his fourth wife. Even the village was now upset. Bill almost felt sorry for Ij Jok. Since almost the entire village was Christian, even the pagans said, "We do not trust his decisions any more. Even though he is the chief, he is a scoundrel, and everyone knows it."



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The system seems to be working. Twenty years ago when the Christian and Missionary Alliance made the first decision not to smash up plural marriages but to let them run their course while preventing any further polygamy, it was a daring experiment. The Christian and Missionary Alliance was in the forefront of mission agencies applying anthropological insights. This isolated field in West Irian seemed to be a God-given opportunity to try this new strategy. Later the Unevangelized Fields Mission, the Regions Beyond Missionary Union and the Australian Baptists entered the area in other tribes and followed the same plan. Now only the Roman Catholic mission insists on breaking up the plural families, and with little success. Cautious parallel experiments are being attempted now in certain parts of Africa by other missions. It is admittedly a complex situation.

Bill is now on furlough in the United States. Just a few days ago his mission board told him that it was sending a single nurse to help with medical problems in the West Irian field. She would be returning with Bill's family next summer to work in his area.

"Would it be all right for her to live with your family for the first few months at least?" Bill was asked. "We feel it is not safe for her to live alone."

Bill's first impulse was, "Sure, why not?" Then he thought again. If she lived in the guest room in his home, even though it had a separate, outside entrance, would Mote think he had simply added a second wife? ●