



Pacific Art

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Until the mid-twentieth century, approximately ten to twenty percent of those cultures living on islands in the Pacific Ocean practiced male homosexuality in a ritual context. In Papua New Guinea, Irian Jaya, New Caledonia, New Britain, and Vanuatu, homosexuality was considered a necessary activity that "grew" boys into mature adult men.

In Pacific cultures, male homosexuality was transitory and age-graded. Older partners were thought to pass their knowledge and power to younger boys via semen.

Sambian Initiation

Among the Sambia, who inhabit the Southeastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, every male had to go through a series of six stages of initiation that lasted approximately ten years.

Teenagers who were between puberty and the age of marriage "implanted" their semen daily in boys between age nine and puberty, so that it would spread its perceived male virtue through their growing bodies. At marriage, youths became bisexuals for a time. After fatherhood, homosexuality ceased as men became exclusively heterosexual. This process was typical of other Pacific cultures.

Pacific Island men were absolutely convinced of their innate lack of semen and of the necessity of the homosexual rituals, and they transmitted their convictions to boys through ritual teaching. Their beliefs were substantiated when, after years of ritualized homosexuality, the signs of strength and masculinity took physical form in the initiates.

Ritual Flutes

Older initiates and adult men typically taught young Pacific Island initiates the mechanics of homosexual fellatio through the use of ritual flutes. During the flute ceremony, men passed a flute from initiate to initiate, encouraging each boy to insert it into his mouth. Initiated men then equated the flute with the penis and told the boys that they must ingest semen to grow into mature men. The boys were also sworn to secrecy.

Throughout the Pacific Islands, flutes took a variety of shapes and forms and were made from a range of materials. Among the Sambia, they were made from freshly cut bamboo left open at one end. In Vanuatu, flutes took on a variety of forms, from short and undecorated to long and beautifully incised with patterns including plants, marine animals, spirit faces, and erotic designs.

Bullroarers

Bullroarers also symbolized masculinity in Pacific cultures. Shaped like flat, pointed ovals, these wooden objects often are covered with geometric and organic forms pigmented red, white, and black. One end is

pierced to accommodate a cord. Men use this cord to swing the bullroarer through the air so that it spins on its own axis. The resulting noise sounds like the howls and roars of animals. Pacific Islanders say that bullroarers emit the voices of the spirits.

The Sosum Ritual

A central rite of the first stage of male initiation for the Marind-anim of southeast Irian Jaya is called the sosum ritual. Sosum, which is also the Marind-anim word for bullroarer, is an ancestor whose penis was cut off by his female partner's mother while he was entrapped in copulation.

During the sosum ritual, men danced around a giant red effigy of Sosum's penis to the sound of bullroarers and flutes. Afterwards, they enticed the initiates into homosexual intercourse.

The sosum ritual may symbolize the belief of Marind-anim men that vaginal intercourse can result in physical pollution and death. Some scholars have hypothesized that homosexual activities resulted from this particular belief. Indeed, Marind-anim myths are replete with tales of dema--ancestors such as Sosum who were trapped in intercourse--and of dema who were castrated by mothers of girls with whom they had sex.

Vanuatu

On Vanuatu, homosexual behavior is believed to generate a power that can both physically and spiritually transform the participants and, by extension, others. The roots of this generalized belief are found in male initiation rituals.

As with other Pacific Island cultures, the penis is a recurrent theme during initiation in Vanuatu. To underscore the importance of the penis, each initiate receives a wrapper of the type that will be worn around his penis for the rest of his life. These woven textiles are sometimes created with dyed fiber and decorated with geometric designs.

Shark symbolism was a recurrent theme during male initiation in Vanuatu. Various masks danced in during initiations represent sharks, and the ends of some flutes are reminiscent of open fish mouths.

The shark was valued for its ferocity, a vital masculine trait. Additionally, it held a powerful position in Vanuatu mythology. As the messenger of the ancestral underworld, the shark functioned as a bridge between the world of the living and that of the dead.

Conclusion

Some Pacific Island cultures continue to practice ritualized male homosexuality today. Others abandoned these activities under the instruction of missionaries and the influence of Western culture.

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