

GARDENING AMONG PAPUAN SAVAGES.

A Draft Manuscript

by

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(Transcribed by Kim Akerman)

Kiriwina is the native name for the Trobriands Group of Islands, consisting of a belt of coral reef surrounding a large lagoon, lying off the North East coast of Papua. The central feature and factor of the communal life of the Kiriwina natives is the village yam garden. The yam, which forms the staple food of the people, is a vegetable similar to the potato though larger in size and of a coarser flesh. There are numerous varieties differing in size and flavour but some of the best kinds are as mealy and as palatable as the potato. The crumbly soil formed from the disintegrated coral is rich in phosphates nitrates and carbonates. With an annual average rainfall of 102 inches, on this suitable ground immense quantities of yams are grown every year, enabling the Kiriwina islands to carry a high percentage of population to the acre. At the end of the largest island, within a semicircle of radius eight miles from my home, a census which I took showed that the natives numbered over 7000. This exceptionally high proportion of natives to the acre will be understood when we remember that the total population of the Samoan Islands numbers 15000.

The land surrounding each village is divided into several annual garden areas with the landmarks of the family plots formed by rows of lumpy coral. Each area in turn is cultivated for one crop of yams. Situated within the eighth degree of Latitude South of the Equator, Kiriwina has no distinct change of seasons corresponding to our summer and winter. The time for preparing to plant the garden is decided by observing the positions of certain groups of stars near the western and eastern horizons just before dawn. On the day fixed for starting the clearing of the ground the men of the village all take part in cutting a wide swathe through the bush along the boundary line on which the encircling fence is to be erected. The garden priest, in whose family the right is invested, accompanies them in this work with the prescribed ceremonies and thus takes charge of the garden as spiritual protector.

To the superstitious savage the mysteries of nature, such as the rolling thunder and flashing lightning in the sky above him as well as the rumbling and quaking in the earth beneath him, are evidence of the presence and power of malignant spirits whose evil purposes must be prevented or thwarted by the sorcerer's magic rites. So, through the days and night of the season of growth the priest makes regular trips around the garden, shouting his incantations and threats to drive away any evil spirits that might bring damage to the crop.

The men cut down the thick scrub that has grown wild for several years and the women, with pointed sticks, break up the cleared surface and also clear away all roots and weeds preparatory to planting.

In addition to planting the seed yams the women do all other work necessary to keep the garden clear of weeds and in training the yam vines to grow up the sapling stakes which have been saved from the bush clearing. For this purpose through the succeeding months until harvest, the women go from their homes to the garden soon after sunrise every morning, returning at midday, generally carrying on their heads loads of firewood to be used in cooking the family dinner.

When the yams are fully grown the men and women join in lifting the crop and carrying the yams in baskets to be stored in the village. The villages are built in a circular form with an outer ring of dwellings and an inner circle of huts in which to store the yams. As soon as the work of harvesting the crop is completed the chief of the village proceeds to perform the very important ceremony of imposing a taboo on the laden yam houses, designed to prevent any pillaging of the yams or harm of any kind being done to them. This is one of the high days in the calendar of the chief's official duties, and no custom or ceremony that might serve to mark the importance of the occasion is omitted.

The chewing of betel nuts, betel leaves and lime, combined with fasting from ordinary food while preparing the taboo has developed in the chief a state of exhilaration akin to intoxication. His person is decorated with the insignia of his office: the large shell armlets, - heirlooms of priceless value – on his biceps muscles: and strings of white cowrie shells tied round his legs beneath the knees – one of the sure signs of high rank. He steps forth from his house in the presence of all his people, who greet him with the homage due to his office and cry – GUIAU IOKU – You are a great chief! He goes to each yam house in turn and speaking his sacred incantations, he ties around the door post one of the lengths of coco-nut leaf to which, by his sorcerer's skill he has imparted the power to cause the death of any person who would dare break the taboo thus imposed to ensure the safety of the stored yams.

This is the beginning of the happiest time of all the year in the feasting and dancing of the harvest festival which lasts for several weeks. The dance programme is carried out by the men in the clear space in the centre of the village during the afternoon and evenings. The dancers decorate their oiled and painted bodies with bunches of cassowary feathers and fill their shock heads of hair with white cockatoo feathers. They spin round in a circle, with occasional p[auses for bending and stepping, to the music of the men who stand within the ring and beat the native drums made of iguana skin stretched over pieces of hollowed wood. They have many dances, with different music and movements, but all are performed in honour of their ancestral spirits who, as they assert, have come up from TUMA, their spirit world underneath the land and the sea, and during the festival are resting on the high platform erected specially for them in the village. This platform is shown in the accompanying photograph near the centre of the picture. The natives really and truly believe that the spirits are present. Songs are sung to them by the musicians, speeches are made to them calling their attention to the full houses and invitations are

given to them to share in the food of the feast with the members of their families. On some of the days, all the chief's articles of wealth – shell armlets and long strings of shell-money – are displayed on a platform and the spirits are invited to inspect the treasure and to take away those which they desire to have. At length the festival is brought to a close with a characteristic anti-climax. On the last night, to the accompaniment of yells, shouts and blowing of conch shells, all the people join in driving the spirits from their platform and out of the village, away down to the traditional place on the sea beach, near to which all spirits take their plunge through the sea down to their spirit home underneath. After many calls of KAIONE – Farewell to the departing spirits the people return to the village and the next day resume their normal way of life.
