

## Notes and News

### *Condition of Women in two West African Societies: Dogon, French Sudan; Kissi, French Guinea*

At a joint meeting of the International African Institute and the Royal Anthropological Institute, Madame Denise Paulme-Schaeffner, director of the Département d'Afrique Noire in the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, read a paper based on her field studies in French West Africa, of which the following is a summary:

The Dogon live in the bend of the Niger, building their villages on high rocky cliffs overlooking the sandy Volta plain. The author spent a year among them and concentrated on a study of the women—since as a rule anthropological studies are concerned mainly with the men. A Dogon girl begins at an early age to take part in the work of her father's household—minding babies, fetching wood and water, working her own garden, and selling the produce. Girls undergo initiation at about 14 or 15 years of age, but this ceremony is not universally practised and is never accompanied by so much ritual as is that of boys. Clitorodectomy is practised and for a fortnight afterwards the girls live in seclusion, their emergence being greeted with songs celebrating their return to health and praising their beauty.

Polygyny is allowed by custom, but is in fact rare, and a man practically never has more than two wives. According to Dogon marriage custom, wives are of two kinds: *Ya biru* and *Ya kedū*. *Ya biru* is the wife a man has won by working during several years for his prospective parents-in-law. Such marriages are often arranged when the parties are children, though the girl may refuse to carry out the arrangement when she comes of age. If the girl agrees, she spends the night with her husband, then returns to her father's village and does not live with her husband till after the birth of her first child. During this time she sleeps at the girls' hut, spending occasional nights with her husband, and often taking a lover. This causes no social disapproval and such a union may last for three years provided no child is conceived. *Ya kedū* is usually the legal wife of another husband whom she has left in order to form a new union, which is celebrated in much the same way as a legal marriage and incurs no social disapproval. Divorce is easy and is not regulated by any rigid code. Observation suggests that marriages among the Dogon lack stability, the women being hard to please, sharp-tongued and quick-tempered, and prone to leave their husbands and form unions with other men. The reason may be that in a patrilocal system a woman feels no strong attachment either to her father's home, which she is certain to leave at an early age, or to her husband's village, where she is always regarded as a stranger.

The Kissi people are probably by origin forest-dwellers and the forests which still characterize the southern parts of their country play an important part in their lives. In the forest the bush schools for both boys and girls take place. The girls' initiation, called *sambele*, is the occasion for much feasting, music, and dancing. For a year the girls live together, sleeping in the same house, dancing two or three evenings a week. The excision operation is carried out at a special place in the forest and is preceded and followed by music and dancing. After the operation the girls remain in retreat for about a month; at the end of that time, and just before returning home, they, like the boys, undergo various trials of endurance. The end of the retreat is marked by a dance. The *sambele* is much valued by all women, and the period spent at the bush school is looked back on as a time of care-free happiness before the burdens and tasks of marriage are undertaken. Although no special teaching is given and no secret knowledge imparted, the school seems to produce in the women a sense of solidarity and of their social importance as the channels of life and birth.