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**RAPE IN A "RAPE-FREE" SOCIETY: RE-EVALUATING THE RUNGUS CASE<sup>1</sup>****Reed L. Wadley****ABSTRACT**

This paper is an examination of rape and sexual aggression among the Rungus of northern Borneo. The available evidence for rape in this supposedly "rape-free" society is evaluated against the claim that rape is the result of socialization rather than the biological propensities of males. The examination leads to several important points of consideration in the study of rape cross-culturally; namely, the role of punishment as a deterrent to rape, victim vulnerability, socialization of sexual restraint, the problem of reporting rapes, and the linkage of sex and aggression with comparative treatment of the Iban. It is concluded that, in this case, the evidence for the absence of rape is equivocal. This suggests that rape is present but infrequent, and occurs despite important traditional social controls.

# RAPE IN A "RAPE-FREE" SOCIETY: RE-EVALUATING THE RUNGUS CASE<sup>1</sup>

by

Reed L. Wadley

## ABSTRACT

This paper is an examination of rape and sexual aggression among the Rungus of northern Borneo. The available evidence for rape in this supposedly "rape-free" society is evaluated against the claim that rape is the result of socialization rather than the biological propensities of males. The examination leads to several important points of consideration in the study of rape cross-culturally; namely, the role of punishment as a deterrent to rape, victim vulnerability, socialization of sexual restraint, the problem of reporting rapes, and the linkage of sex and aggression with comparative treatment of the Iban. It is concluded that, in this case, the evidence for the absence of rape is equivocal. This suggests that rape is present but infrequent, and occurs despite important traditional social controls.

## INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to *Female and Male in Borneo*, Sutlive and Appell (1991:xli n. 8; also 1991:xv) state that in "those indigenous societies of Borneo for whom the concept and language of forced sex do exist, there is no evidence for the perpetration of rape in traditional [non-urban] indigenous communities." In this paper I examine one detailed study of rape and sexual aggression among the Rungus of northern Borneo (Appell 1991) that claims to support the argument that rape is the result of socialization rather than the biological propensities of males. The examination leads to several important points of consideration in the study of rape cross-culturally; namely, the role of punishment as a deterrent to rape, victim vulnerability, socialization of sexual restraint, the problem of reporting rapes, and the linkage of sex and aggression. It is hoped that this will stimulate further study and research on rape and sexual assault in Borneo and other Southeast Asian societies.

## RAPE CROSS-CULTURALLY

In her cross-cultural study of rape, Sanday (1981) outlines the criteria for societies in which rape does not occur. She cites respect for women, prestige of

women's roles, minimal interpersonal violence, and reverence toward the natural environment as central features in such societies (1981:16-17). People familiar with Southeast Asia will see these criteria reflected in societies throughout the region. Women in Southeast Asia are well known for the strong presence they have in social, political, and ritual life, and for their important roles in the subsistence and commercial economies (e.g. Atkinson and Errington 1990; Karim 1995; Ong and Peletz 1995; Morrison 1995). These social and cultural patterns are also of considerable antiquity (e.g. Reid 1988; Burling 1992).

Looking at Borneo, Sutlive and Appell (1991) conclude that societies there fall into Sanday's (1981) category of "rape-free" societies. They acknowledge, however, that the variables defining rape-free societies are not exhibited by all societies in Borneo (e.g. Iban society [see below]) (1991:xxxii; see also Appell 1991:115 n. 17). This lack of fit is not surprising primarily because Sanday's definition and usage of "rape-free" are inconsistent (Palmer 1988a:109-112), drawing the validity of her conclusions into doubt. She defines "rape-free" as those societies in which rape is "reported as *rare* or *absent*" (1981:9; my emphasis). However, if rape is rare in a society, it does still occur, albeit infrequently. The label, "rape-free," is thus inaccurate.

Sanday is also inconsistent in applying the criteria used to categorize societies. For example, she classifies several societies as rape-free on the basis of punishment for rape being reported (1981:16), but classifies another society as rape-prone because "the rape of a woman is not permitted, but the punishments are established, suggesting that rape is a frequent occurrence" (1981:14). Furthermore, Sanday equates rape-free societies with the criteria of respect for women, prestige of women's roles, minimal interpersonal violence, and reverence toward the natural environment. In doing so, her argument becomes tautological, defining the variables *a priori* according to what her study is supposed to test.

Sanday's study, along with others (Minturn et al. 1969; Broude and Greene 1976), have been recently countered by Palmer (1989a) who examines 17 societies previously claimed to be rape-free. He demonstrates that *actual evidence* is lacking for the absence of rape in any of these societies. Furthermore, in 14 of those societies claims of a lack of rape are clearly contradicted, often by evidence recorded by the same ethnographer. An additional 14 societies claimed to be accepting of rape actually possess some sort of punishment for rape.

The study of rape, however, presumes a definition that is applicable cross-culturally. The one I use here defines rape as "the act of forcing, or



coercing through threat of force, a nonconsenting woman [or man] to have sexual intercourse" (Palmer 1989a:2; see also Thornhill and Thornhill 1983:141; Symons 1979:278; Snelling 1975).<sup>2</sup> Rape also necessarily involves the victim's "resistance to the best of his/her ability, or the reasonable likelihood that such resistance would result in death or bodily harm to the victim or others whom he/she commonly protects" (Palmer 1989b:358; cf. Bourque 1989).

This definition, I would argue, is not only applicable cross-culturally but across species as well (see Palmer 1989b). One need not be concerned necessarily if the society (or species) in question has a special term for rape or even if it is conceptualized in other ways, although the presence of rape-oriented language in any human society strengthens the argument that rape potentially occurs. *The absence of such language does not imply the absence of rape.*

While all that is necessary to identify rape is the identification of the behavioural elements specified in the definition, this does not preclude the recognition of rape as a jural or legal phenomenon in human society. Appell takes this task in distinguishing "rape, that is sexual assault which is unlawful in the society studied, from various forms of intercourse which are against the wishes of the female or male but which are not considered illegal, as in marital relations" (1991:58). This recognition, however, introduces an element of ambiguity into the identification of at least some rapes, in the sense of a crime having been committed. In some societies women may not be perceived as having the right to refuse intercourse, especially in marriage where a husband may be regarded as entitled to intercourse regardless of the wishes of his wife. However, saying there is no jural recognition of a woman's right to refuse intercourse may be another way of saying that women who might try to refuse will not be supported by others and may even be subject to punishment for refusing (Craig Palmer, personal communication). I would contend that even in such societies there will still be other less ambiguous cases, and even with legally ambiguous cases, rape may still be said to occur given the definition I use here (cf. Snelling 1975).

## RUNGUS SOCIETY

The Rungus are an ethnic group inhabiting the Kudat District of Sabah (North Borneo), Malaysia. Traditionally they were swidden agriculturalists and were organized into domestic families, longhouses made up of several families occupying separate apartments within a longhouse, and villages of clustered longhouses (Appell 1966, 1968). Appell writes that the longhouse and village cannot be considered kinship units "for kinship is not a distinction made in the recruitment to such units by the Rungus themselves" (1966:282).