



The Gentle Yamis of Orchid Island

A PICTURE STORY BY CHANG SHUHUA





MARCO CHARTRE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STAFF

Pike Place Market after the city made plans to raze it for a parking garage.

"Exactly what I said—'Wow!'"

The Piper checked out to Dr. Heath's satisfaction, and we turned back toward Friday Harbor. Half a mile below us I caught sight of a familiar shape, the island where Frank Wolff and Jim Whittaker and I had encountered the octopus some weeks before.

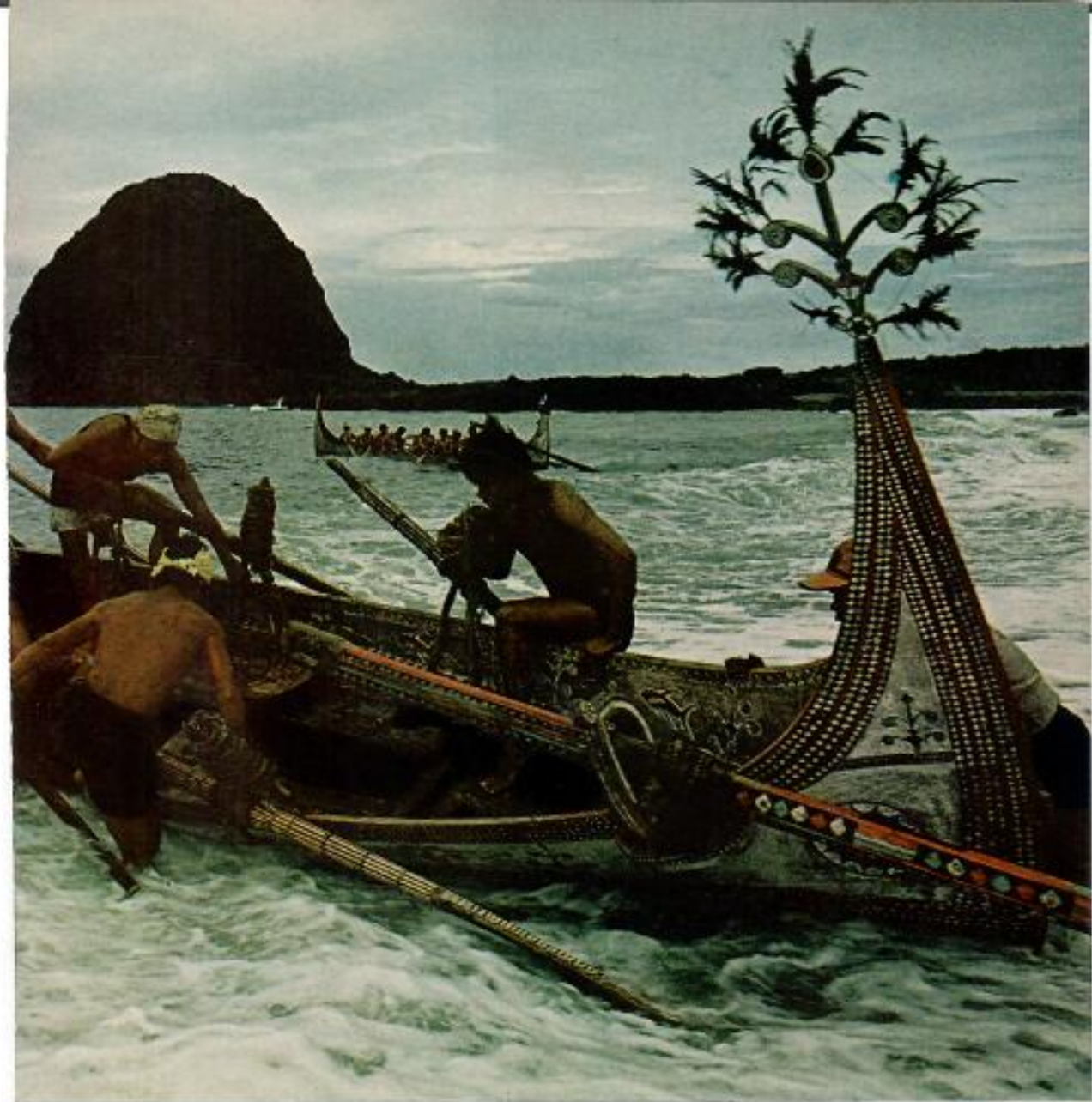
Will Nature's Balance Survive?

After lunch that day we had snorkeled beside a surface ledge where a herd of harbor seals lay sunning. With the assurance of creatures unused to man, the seals had joined us for a time in the water, darting gracefully

among us and now and then approaching within inches to peer curiously and innocently into our face masks with luminous brown eyes. The experience had been memorable for all three of us.

From the Piper high overhead I failed to make out any forms on the ledge; perhaps the seals were off foraging in some nearby kelp bed for a meal of bass and lingcod. I thought briefly of their chances for survival in an incomparable wilderness both beloved and increasingly threatened by man.

The island drifted behind, but the question remained. □

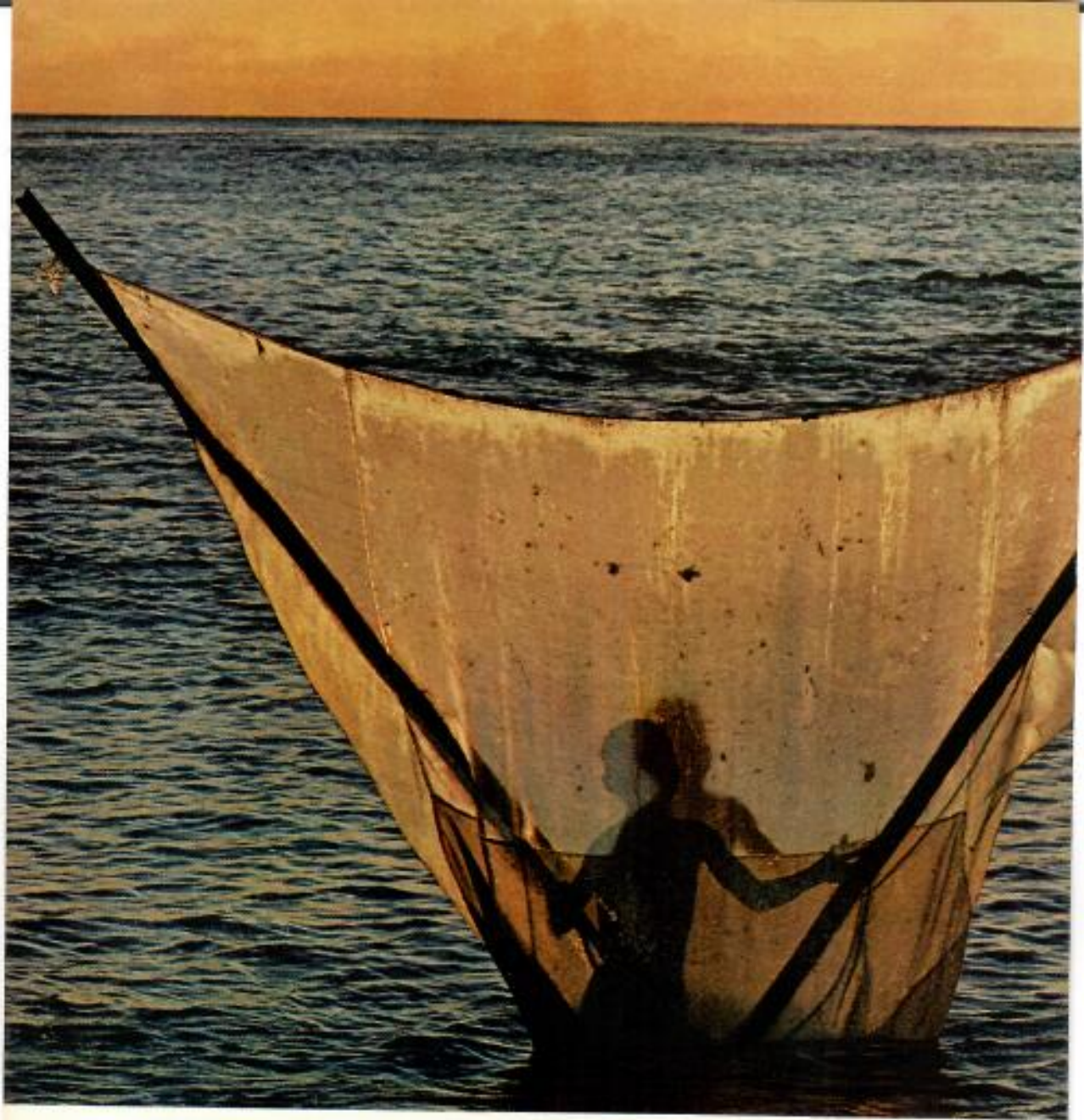


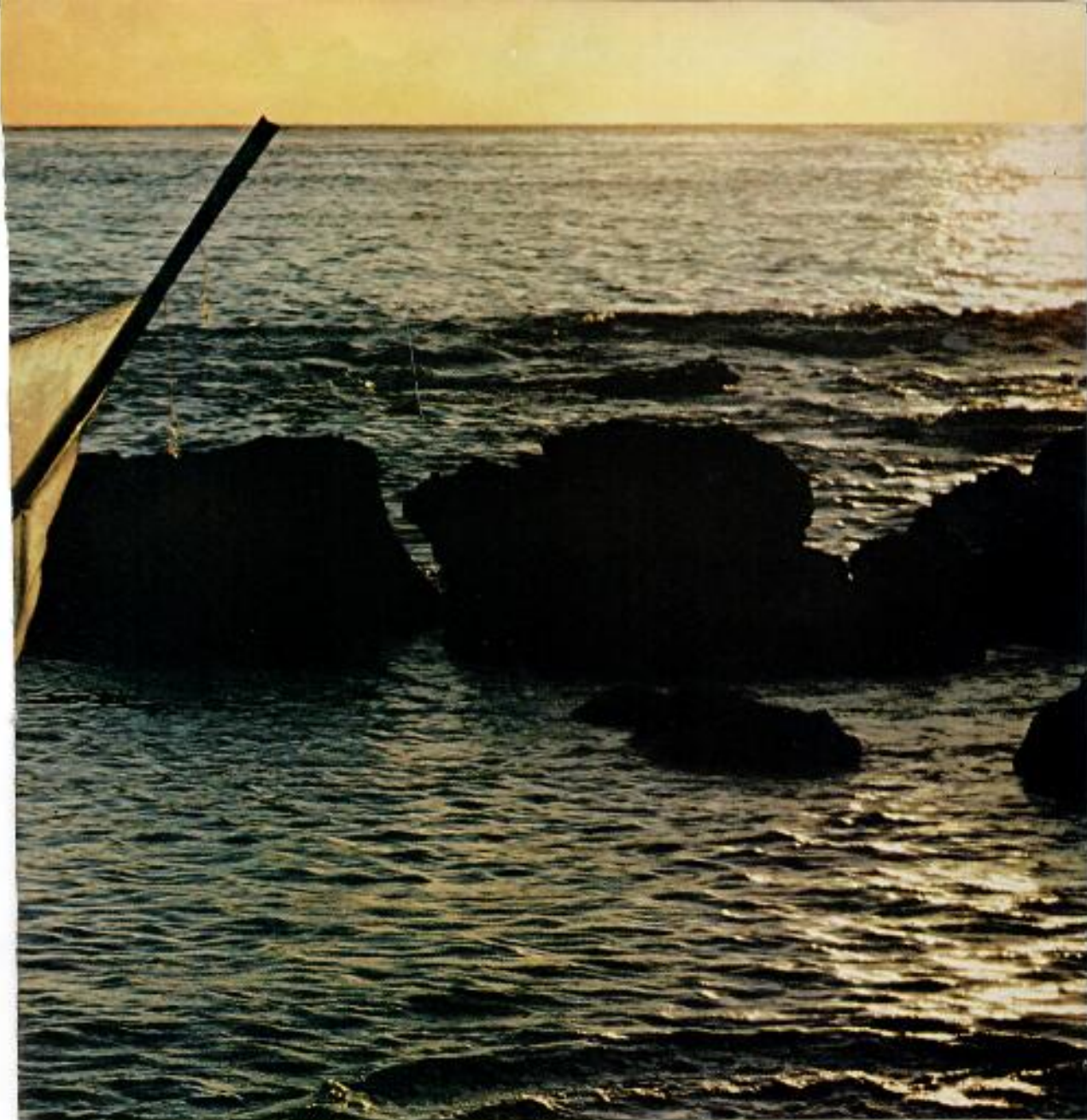
SAILING in the wake of their past, Yami fishermen of Lan Yü—Orchid Island—put out to sea in an elaborate ceremonial canoe (above) hewn from trees of their densely forested homeland in the western Pacific, off Taiwan. One hundred years of alternating and casual rule by Chinese and Japanese have done little to pry these people from the ways of their Southeast Asian ancestors, who, according to one ancient legend, emerged from the sea.

Strangers to any formal authority, they have neither chief nor priest, but practice instead a primitive kind of democracy, settling

their disputes by argument and sharing in the wealth of the sea that surrounds their orchid-strewn little island. At the close of the day these men may haggle over who was to blame for poor fishing, but will nonetheless end by scrupulously dividing their catch into even shares.

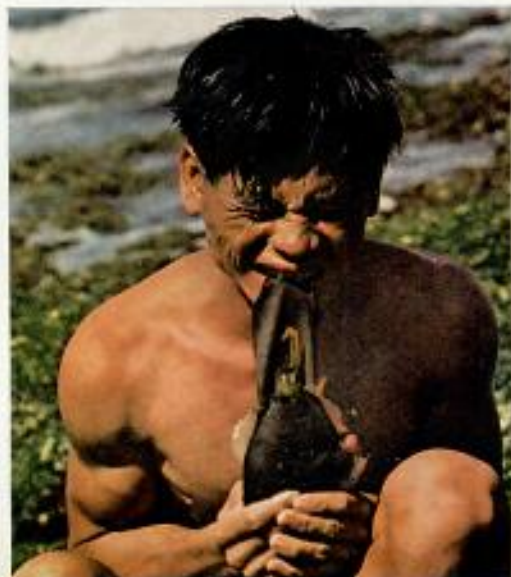
During flying-fish season, which lasts from February to June, the Yamis are able to net their most abundant seafood delicacy in mid-air. But the rest of the year is not so bountiful, and the men must supplement their often meager catches by diving along the coral reefs with crude spear guns (left).





HOISTING HIS NET from the sun-shot sea, a young islander (above) hopes for a few of the fish that hug the shore. A senior tribesman (left) searches a coral cave for fish which have been stunned with native poisons. Superstitious eaters, the Yamis distribute each catch according to size and color: brightly colored fish for the women, dark-colored for the men, and (what else?) small fry for the children. After skinning a leathery filefish with his teeth (right), this man will eat its liver on the spot and give the much-savored raw eyes to the youngsters.

The Gentle Yamis of Orchid Island







WITHIN SIGHT of Taiwan on a clear day, 18-square-mile Orchid Island lies some 40 miles off the coast of its Nationalist Chinese protector, which built and maintains six schools for islanders and a prison camp for Taiwanese convicts here. The Yamis have only recently begun to join the mainstream—much to the chagrin of this woman dressed in ceremonial finery (below) and other elders, who remain fierce guardians of the island's heritage.



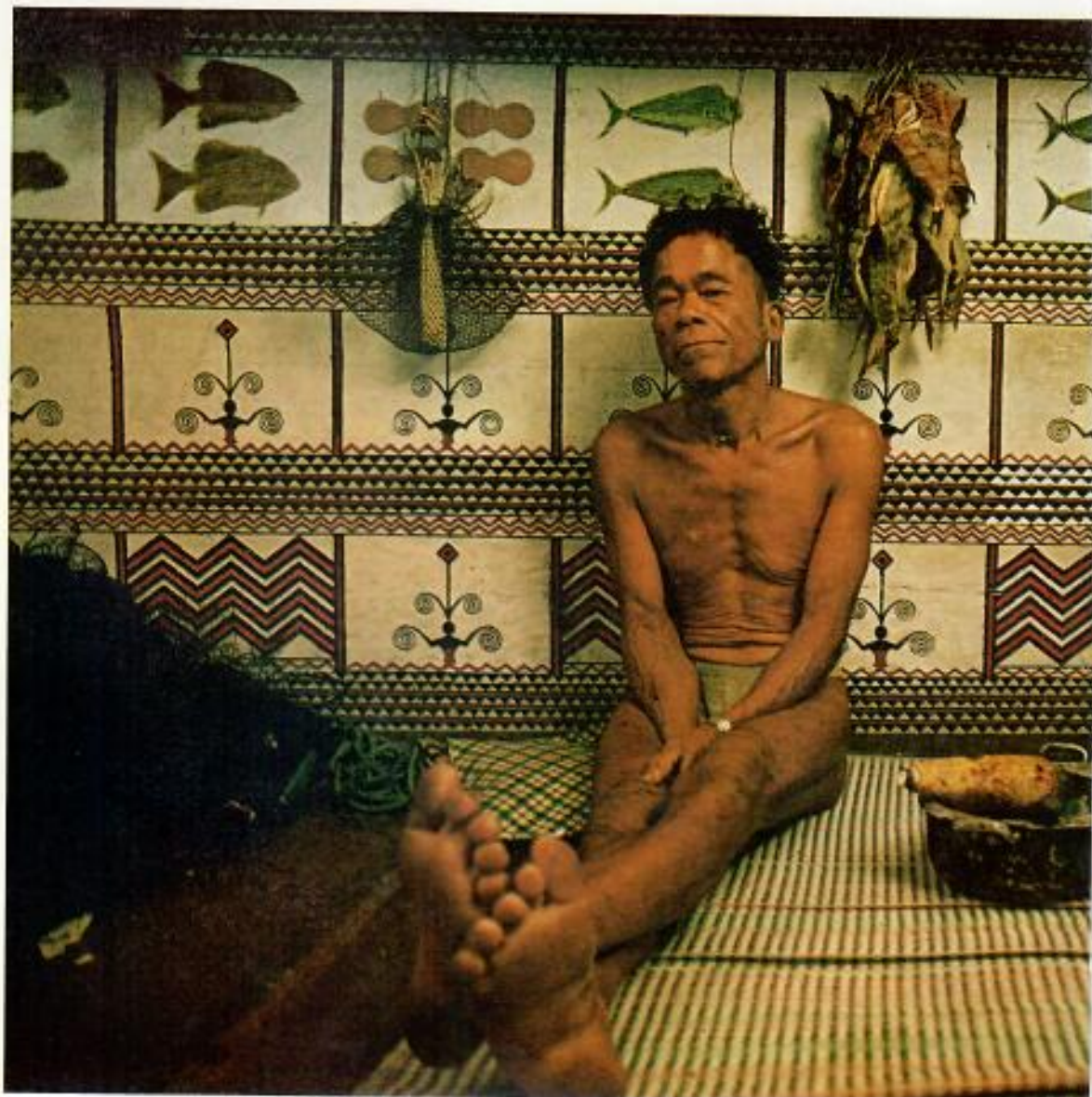


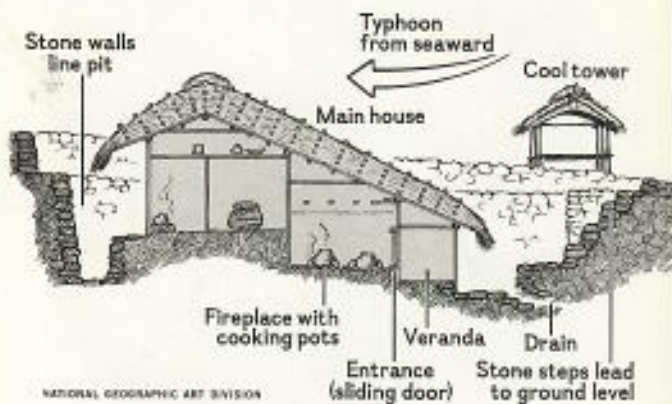
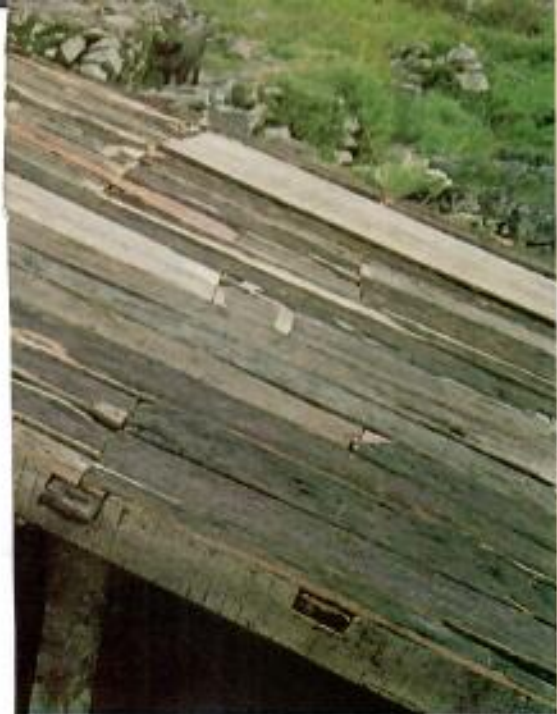
TOSSING THEIR HAIR to the sky, Yami women joyously celebrate the annual flying-fish festival. The women of Orchid Island share equally in inheritance and expect much help from their men with domestic chores and child rearing; they choose their own husbands and have the option of trial marriage, which only they themselves can dissolve. If a Yami couple remains childless, the husband, not the wife, is held accountable and has to bear the disgrace of divorce. The husband must also be a good provider, since a shiftless groom can be shown the door. But while it lasts, marriage is sacred and adultery taboo.

High on the list of auspicious occasions,

house christenings draw kinfolk from all over the island to feast with their proud hosts and display family wealth. Hair is being seared from a fattened pig (right), which will later be cut up and passed out raw for the enjoyment of the guests. But no liquor! The Yamis drink no spirits—home-brewed or imported. Though children now learn the Chinese language and are slowly adapting to modern dress, the island diet remains inviolate: meat only during ceremonies; fish, taro root, and sweet potatoes at all other times. Perhaps in part because of this limited fare, a high child-mortality rate has kept Orchid Island's population stable for the past hundred years—between 1,300 and 2,000.







NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC ART DIVISION

“**V**ERY HUMBLE,” is how this gentle Yami couple (left) characterize their people. Humble, yet resolute, for they spurn such inducements of civilization as modern housing, offered free by the Taiwan Government. The Yamis know that their traditional homes, built mostly below ground (top left and diagram above), will protect them from typhoons. To escape the midday tropic heat, each family has a “cool tower,” where the women spend much of their time weaving, gossiping, and preening their family members’ hair (top right). Painted wall carvings reveal an Austronesian influence.

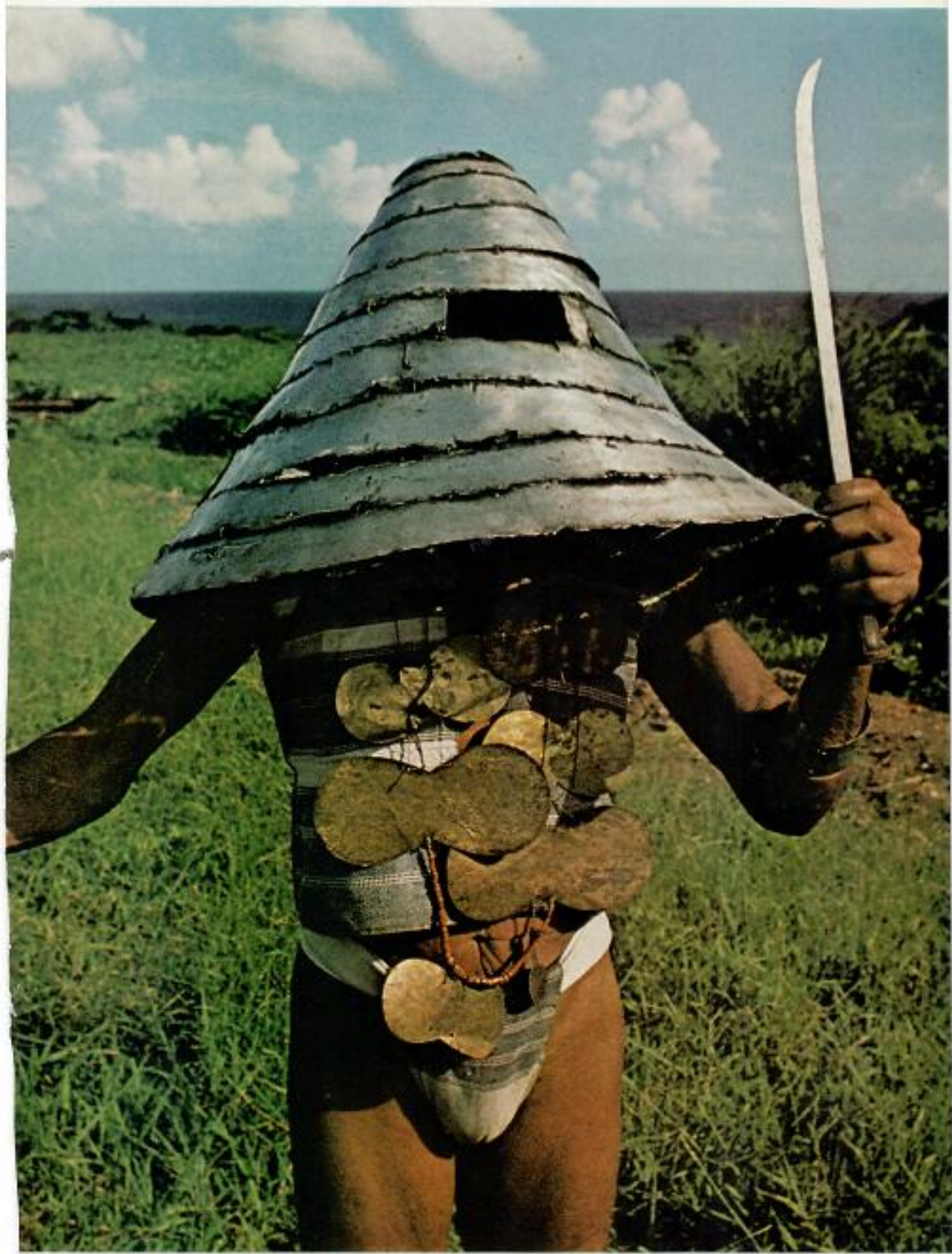
THE FEARSOME silver helmet (right) is the most prized symbol of wealth on Orchid Island. Forged from coins acquired through barter, helmets are passed from father to son, with each successor adding at least one coil. For more than one son, the coils are divided and new helmets begun.

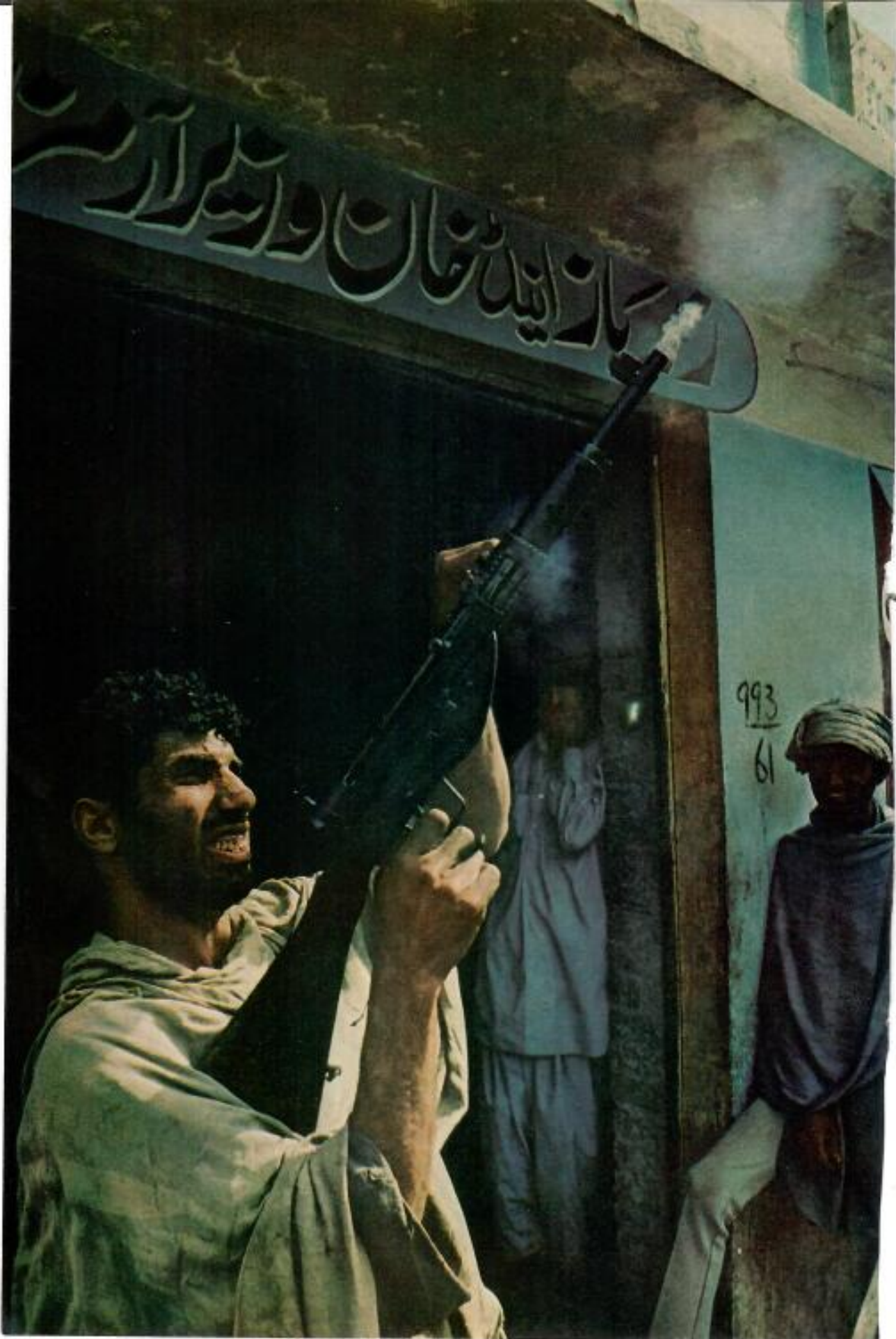
The Yamis turn to ritual instead of battle



when tempers flare, limiting themselves to throwing an occasional stone. Proper trappings for such sham fights include a rattan helmet, sword, staff, and leather tunic (above). In the past, when actually threatened, the Yamis have reacted with ferocity. For instance, in 1903 they battled shipwrecked Americans who, they claimed, had fired on them. Responding to U. S. complaints, Japan sent a force to the island; it took several prisoners and burned many homes. Bitterness reigned for years, but memories fade, while the silver helmets grow . . . and grow. □







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