10.3: Inis Beag

Coordinates:

53.399°N 9.897°W Inis Beag (Irish: “Little Island”) is a remote island off the coast of Connemara, Ireland, near the Aran Islands. It contains a small, isolated Irish-speaking Catholic community which cultural anthropologist John Cowan Messenger observed in his study “Sex and Repression in an Irish Folk Community”. During the period of his study between 1958 and 1966, Inis Beag supported a population of around 350, mostly living by subsistence farming and fishing. The name “Inis Beag” is a name made up by researchers to protect the privacy of the island’s people. Its true identity is Inisheer.[1][2]

Messenger’s study of this community has often been cited by anthropologists and sexologists as an example of extreme sexual repression. Inis Beag had no formal sex education, and sexual intercourse was treated by both sexes as a necessary evil which must be endured for the sake of reproduction. Phenomena such as menstruation and menopause were regarded with fear and disgust. Breast-feeding was avoided. Not only was premarital sex almost non-existent, but kissing, caressing, and any affection was seen as too sexual and was therefore prohibited. Nudity was extremely private, to the extent that even a married couple conducted intercourse in the dark and fully clothed, except for genitals. Sex was also practiced only in the missionary position. Any variation of sex was seen as deviant and sinful.

Bathing was also “unknown” and the average age at marriage was 36 for men and 25 for women. A man was considered a “boy” until age 40. Dogs were also whipped for licking their genitals.[3] The repressive atmosphere, according to the researchers, led to high levels of masturbation, drinking, and alcohol-fueled fights.[3]
References


Bibliography