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PREVIEW

The Collecting Instinct

I often wonder what makes people collect objects. Is there a reason in back of the urge to amass things? It is interesting to speculate on the origins of collecting, for a museum, quite beside its utility as a center for research and teaching, represents the fruit of a multitude of private collections.

A few summers ago my wife and I had an opportunity to observe two groups of people living in conditions which are popularly described as the Stone Age. A mountain valley, perhaps fifteen miles long, about 7,500 feet above sea level, cradled in the highest folds of the Nassau Range in the mountains of New Guinea, contains two groups of the Ndani and Uhunduni tribes, perhaps eight thousand souls in all.

In the past few years two families of American missionaries have arrived in the valley at the invitation of the tribes themselves. The tribal elders or headmen had come to this decision, so one missionary himself thought, in order to put a halt to the incessant wars and feud killings, which had reached a point beyond their endurance. The missionaries had directed the clearing of a small airstrip, and now the two families and two additional American nurses were ensconced in small, comfortable houses equipped with many characteristic American touches, all brought in piece by piece in single-motored light liaison planes. The Christian and Missionary Alliance and the Missionary Aviation Fellowship allowed the two of us and two

Ambonese assistants to fly up for a month's visit in this, the highest valley yet penetrated by the white man in what is now called West Irian, the western part of the island of New Guinea.

For the Ndani and Uhunduni, life is complex, full of ritual patterns. Men and women live apart in men's houses and women's houses. Men cultivate certain plants fraught with taboo such as taro, women certain others such as sweet potatoes. Their tools are sharpened wood stakes or spears, stone axes, knives, chisels and awls, and they are skillful with the bow and arrow. Wild game such as birds of over two hundred species and marsupial mammals, small wallabies, opossums (squirrellike creatures), rats, mice and the spiny echidna, relative of the Australian platypus, all are eaten whenever secured. Living so high in a damp cold climate, not far from frost, these Papuan tribes are at a bare subsistence level. The common term for this primitive stage of cultural evolution is the Stone Age. Domestic animals consist of the pig, which is not plentiful and is of great value, and a few dogs used for hunting. A number of chickens had been brought in by the missionaries.

Here, then, in this valley removed from the world, out of contact even with the sea which surrounds New Guinea, in touch only with the five or six neighboring valleys through trade or warfare, we found people of surprisingly different degrees of interest and intelligence. The men, self-consciously dominant, achieve their individual status by trade or warfare. Charged with these weighty matters and with the awesome responsibility of the taro crop, they feel that they have superior powers, that they are the supervisors and the arrangers of affairs. They are responsible for the health of the community. If that health is threatened, it is probably a woman who is at the bottom of it. Women obviously have strange, therefore magical, properties. Men must control them at all costs. Otherwise the male psyche might suffer. If a man dies other than in

battle, it is obviously some woman's fault. She has "eaten his spirit," and the chances are it is some woman close to him, his wife or mother. Consequently, if a man dies, a woman is usually killed in revenge for his passing. One wealthy man who had ten wives had recently been very ill before we arrived in the valley. Two of the wives had been killed by his male relatives and the man had recovered. It seemed apparent to all that there was a connection between their death and his recovery. One or other of them had been "eating his spirit."

While the women make thread and tie head nets or with eyeless bone needles create handsomely decorated string or orchid-stem skirts, men endlessly rub rude chunks of hard basaltic rock with other stones to fashion huge ax heads or slim knives and chisels. These blades are sharp and highly efficient. More than that, they have individuality. The tactile sense becomes tremendously developed in people who are illiterate and skilled with their hands. The knives and the ax heads are as distinct and different as pieces of sculpture might be to us. The stones have identity. They are known, and the people who make them are known through them. Obviously, with time these stones and others of peculiar shape or color which are not carved but kept for reasons of choice are invested with a history all their own. They have a real identity, perhaps as much as books have with us.

These stones become collections. Certain important men have many stones. We call them headmen. They are not exactly chiefs, not necessarily members of a hereditary line, but they are prominent older men. Their words are weighty. They have amassed wealth or prestige as traders, although they are more prominent as burghers than as chivalric knights. These men have inherited some stones undoubtedly, but they also collect others. It was difficult to delve into this subject because the missionaries required the people to renounce not only weapons but

also "fetishes" as they called them, in order to be baptized. Prior to visiting the valley I had imagined fetishes would be idols or graven images. But in this case the fetishes were stones. Consequently, by the time of our arrival the stones had been largely destroyed, thrown away, or burned in ceremonial fires. Steel ax heads and knives were being rapidly introduced as trade goods by the missionaries, and stone tools as such had already almost vanished. Here and there an old man could still be seen polishing a stone knife, but the art was already outmoded, a thing of the past.

But the past is not entirely foresworn. By talking with the people we discovered that the stones had not disappeared. Stone collections represent two things, religion and medicine. Certain stones, carefully wrapped up and secreted, usually buried in the ground, represent the spirits, the *manes*. Such stones are religious objects to be venerated. Possession means communion with the world of the ancestors from whom reassurance and a sort of spiritual strength can be derived. I will not quarrel with the missionaries, but from my own point of view I cannot see the harm in possessing these stones and also taking part in Christian worship. They did not seem like "fetishes" to me but more like an anchor to windward. To maintain a link with the past is to venerate the past and so to set down strong and useful roots which can maintain a culture through the twists and turns of fate. To order the destruction of the stones is to make these people *déracinés*. Some of the leaders felt this way, I think. One powerful headman, we were told, had kept his most venerated stone buried away out of sight, just in case the winds of fate brought by the missionaries should shift in the future and his kinfolk again need to take up a link with the past.*

* How wise he might be time alone will tell, for the Indonesian government has not been as encouraging to the missionaries as the former Dutch government. Should the missionaries leave, and the

The third sort of collection was what might be called an economic hoard. These were small yellowish cowrie shells, *Cypraea moneta*, "money cowries" as the common name is, which occur naturally in shallow water along the reefs of the seas of southeast Asia and Melanesia. Money cowries are traded up into the mountains from the seacoasts, passing from hand to hand, filtered gradually through many traders. The Ndanis have not seen the sea, nor have they seen the fishermen. The shells must be fifth- or sixth-hand by the time they come to these sequestered valleys. In spite of this, again by the tactile sense and by keen eyesight, these people have evolved a complex method of evaluating individual shells. Certain cowries have bumps or ridges along the margin of the shell. The quality and style of these bumps, as well as the size of the shell and its color—these several characteristics combine to create an elaborate scale of value. At the top, a single shell might conceivably be worth a wife or a pig. Fine shells in strings of thirty-two are usually sewn onto a strip of twisted woven bark cloth or kept in little groups or bundles in dried moth cocoons tufted with opossum fur, and wrapped securely in small plaited wallets of dried orchid stems. The little bags, like tobacco pouches, are objects of real beauty, beauty contrived to surround precious, rare and valuable things, *objets de vertu*. All such shells must first be enhanced by having the top filed off to reveal the inner cavity with its thin vaselike central columella. A certain tree sap is mashed into the surrounding space to achieve the best results.

These prepared shells graded in strings by their lumps and bumps are the real measure of a man's wealth. They form a sort of capital, like a private gold reserve. They are kept secreted

liaison planes as well, the tribes in these isolated valleys may well have to fall back again on their stones of all classes, including the stone axes.

and are brought out only on occasions of moment such as dickerings over a bride, preparations for a great feast given to earn prestige, for which a number of pigs may be needed, or war settlements when damages or payments or fines may be levied. In everyday trade they are virtually never used, as almost everything is done according to an elaborate system of remembered credit. If a man needed some potatoes at one time, he might return tomatoes for them later, and so on and so on. This barter system is especially brought into play while traveling. Remembered debts of vegetables, salt or other foods serve as credit cards of admittance to some relative's or friend's house in a neighboring valley. A seemingly intricate web of debits and credits must be woven by every individual during his lifetime as he plays a greater or lesser role in the life of his clan or tribe.

We brought a thousand shells into the valley with us, a thousand shells in a package, picked at random from the gleanings of the off-island fishermen of Geelvink Bay. It was interesting to learn how accurate was the Ndani and Uhunduni scale of values. Of these thousand shells, not more than a few dozen specimens had sufficient lumps and bumps on them to be of much value. Only one had the bumps, the color and the size to be of great value, worth an ax at least, perhaps a pig, or, if it had been treated and filled with tree sap, perhaps a wife, who knows? Another, smaller shell was too little to be of great value but had the rugged contours to make it a significant shell. And so from our hoard of a thousand shells, a random sampling, we had one and a half shells of great value, some forty-five shells of good value, perhaps another hundred of modest value, and the rest were merely pennies, as it were. Without ever seeing the sea or the source of supply, these mountain people had assessed the cowries to reflect accurately the proportions of commonness or rarity in the character of the natural population of common little shells. This inherent desire to collect is as highly

evolved as any professional coin or stamp collector could wish.

It seems certain that collecting is at least as old as culture. People such as these may collect for religious, medical or economic reasons, but skill and aesthetics enter at an early stage. The object acquired is centered in a decorative setting. The objects made have beauty, style and economy of line. The skills of craftsmanship evoke the sense of perception, jog the memory and interweave themselves in the very fabric of the culture itself. Culture, then, creates collections; collections create culture. A museum seems to represent the inheritance of one of the oldest instincts of mankind.