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EPW-22
Tari A-While:
"With the Flowers in Their Hair"

P. O. Box 628,
Port Moresby,
Papua,
Territory of Papua
and New Guinea

December 15, 1969

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Executive Director,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
535 Fifth Avenue,
New York 10017, New York,
United States of America

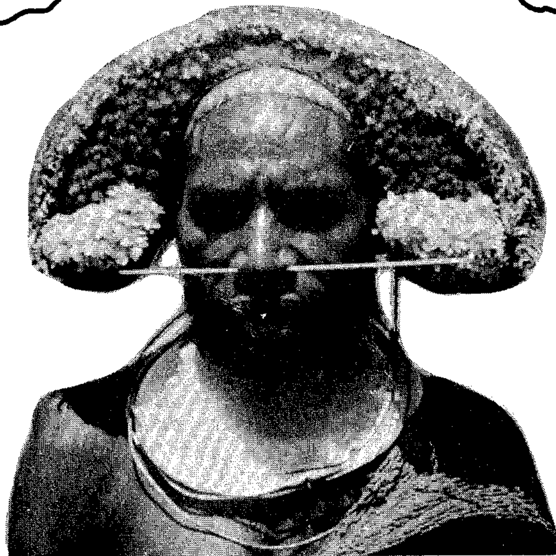
Dear Mr. Nolte,

Papua and New Guinea is popularly regarded as consisting of the last remaining group of "Stone Age Islands" in the world. And in the farthest recesses of the Southern and Western Highlands, the Sepik, and the Western District, a stone age technology no doubt persists. In general, however, steel tools have replaced the stone axe and the adze throughout the Territory except for ceremonial purposes and in tourist shops. The Stone Age is effectively over in most of Papua and New Guinea.

In many ways, Papua and New Guinea never was in the Stone Age as it is popularly conceived. There was no Fred Flintstone here, seated on a stone-work chair and dining from a table made of rock, inside a cave-like house, with a stone-ware car parked outside. In fact, very few Papuans and New Guineans indeed ever did live in caves, and only a few more used stone-headed clubs in war. In general, their use of stone was confined to the manufacture, and employment, of axe-heads (for cutting timber rather than people), and adzes (for scooping wooden bowls and canoes). Although the most efficient cutting tools available were made of stone or bone, the visions conjured up by the use of "Stone Age" to characterise the entire pre-contact way of life probably over-emphasise the role of stone in traditional society.

It is, of course, difficult to shape a piece of stone for daily use without a metal chisel or a power-drill. Papuans and New Guineans, therefore, tended to carry their water in lengths of bamboo, and their food in wooden bowls they hewed with stone. In some areas, they manufactured earthenware pots. Hunting and fighting were carried out with

Lake Kopiago
Wabag
Kompiam
Koroba
Laiagam
Wapenamanda
Tari
Kandep
Kerowagi
Komo
Lake Kutubu
Mt Bosavi
NEW GUINEA
PAPUA

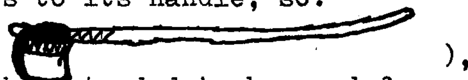


The inter-Territorial boundary separates Papua's Southern Highlands District from New Guinea's Western Highlands District on the map.

The owner squats behind his stone mortar and pestle on the government station at Tari.

wooden, bamboo, or vine traps, or with spears or bows and arrows (which sometimes had a bone tip). Food was cooked through steaming in a pit, or by roasting over an open fire, and then cut up with a bone knife or an axe. Although stone was the most efficient tool available from which tools could be manufactured, it would be wrong to imagine that its use was characteristic of the age other than in axe- or adze-form.

Indeed, one of the minor mysteries of Papua and New Guinea is that where stone artefacts have been found, other than axes or adzes (an adze being a carpenter's tool, used to cut away the surface of timber, and held either in the hand, or with the blade at right-angles to its handle, so:



), they have tended to be used for ceremonial rather than practical purposes. This is true even of the stone mortars and pestles which have been found in some numbers in the Highlands in recent years. In this "Newsletter", I want to record what I have been able to discover about a stone mortar and pestle which came into my possession recently while I was on a short trip to Tari, in the Southern Highlands District of Papua. The following account, then, represents an attempt to understand what the mortar and pestle are to the Huli.

The Huli

Tari is, as the sign on the airstrip says, "the land of the Huli", one of the largest language-groups (numbering more than 50,000) in Papua and New Guinea. It is also one of the least developed, and most densely populated areas of the Territory, with an average of 345.8 persons to the square mile in the Central Basin. First entered by white men (J. G. Hides and L. J. O'Malley) in 1935, the Tari area was only regularly patrolled after the establishment of a government station there in 1952. Only in 1958, was the whole Huli area, which includes the government stations at Tari, Koroba and Komo, officially de-restricted, that is, regarded as having been brought fully under government control. Now, it is

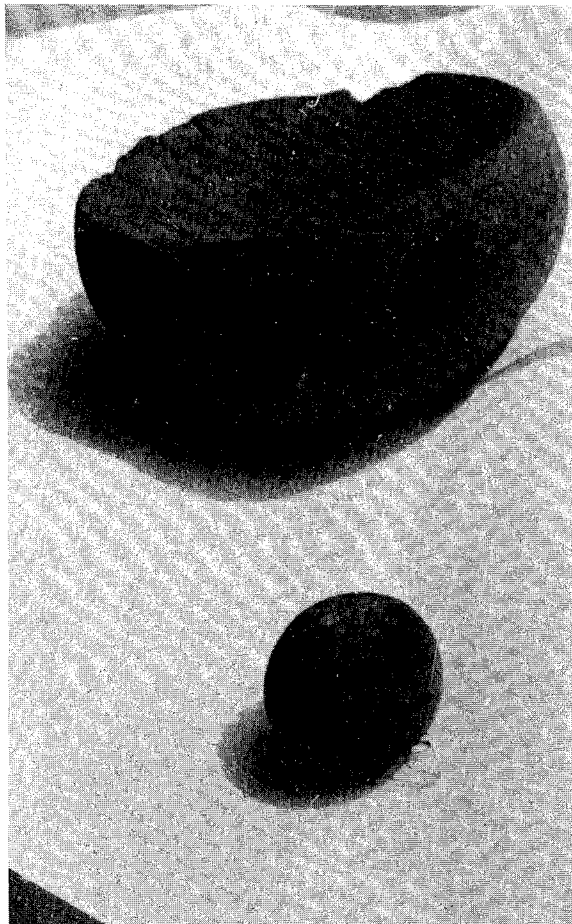
an area of minimal economic development and educational or other contact with the outside world, with about 280 miles of hand-built road around the Tari station, which make contact between the kiaps and the people that much easier, but which as yet lead nowhere else.... A curious symbol of Tari's isolation is the relatively large number of Huli children who speak English (which they learn at school), without being able to speak Pidgin or Police Motu, the two lingue franche that tend to spread independently of the formal educational system, as people move around, and contact with other Papuans and New Guineans intensifies.

Although the Tari — Komo — Koroba area is presently the home of the Huli, they do not regard themselves as being truly indigenous to the area. There are several versions of the story, but, in general, the Huli agree that they are descended from a single ancestor, Hela, who lived near Mount Bosavi (height: 9,500 feet), about 90 miles, as the crow flies, south of Tari. According to the most widespread version of the story, Hela had a son, Helahuli, who, in turn, had four sons, Huli, Obena, Duna, and Tuguba, the ancestors respectively of the Huli, the Enga (of the Wabag — Wapenamanda — Laiagam — Kompiam — Baiyer River area), the Duna (of Lake Kopiago) and the Tuguba (who live to the south of Komo). Other versions of the story seem to regard Huli and Helahuli as the same person, one of four sons (with the three others above) of Hela, while another version gives Obena, Duna and Hewa (the namesake of another, still uncontrolled, language-group which inhabits an area to the north of Lake Kopiago) as the sons of Huli. The first version, however, is probably the most common and reliable version I have obtained, in that it accords with the story recorded by R. M. Glasse, the anthropologist, in his study of Huli religion.

At some stage in the past, so the story runs, the descendants of Obena, Duna and Huli left the hot and humid lowlands of the Bosavi — Lake Kutubu area because of the prevalence of disease (malaria?) and evil ghosts and spirits there. Hence, the Bosavi — Kutubu area is only very sparsely populated now, while the healthier highlands areas (the Tari valley is about 5,300 feet above sea-level) whither the Huli, Enga and Duna migrated are now quite densely populated. The Huli do not, however, live in large communities, but in small groups (in which men and women live in separate houses), scattered through the bush, but which trade and fight in much larger kin- or alliance-based groupings.

Given the dispersed pattern of their settlement, and the absence, until recently, of any centralised authority among the Huli, one should not be surprised if the legends and practices of different Huli groups vary, at least in detail. What is more surprising, in fact, is the comparative uniformity in belief and practice concerning the mortar and pestle over the wide range of Huli society.

The Mortar and Pestle



Stone objects that are generally regarded by outsiders as being mortars and pestles have been found throughout the Papuan and New Guinean highlands, and in adjacent areas in the Western District, the Sepik, and at the headwaters of the Ramu. They are also found in some of the New Guinea islands. Only one man, at Kerowagi in the Chimbu District, has ever been found who remembers making a mortar (in this case), or even seeing one made. In very few areas have the people recently used them for practical purposes — at Lake Kutubu, to prepare cult medicines; and in the Wahgi Valley (which runs from west of Kerowagi to east of Wapenamanda on the map), to prepare arrow-poison from fire-cooked leaves.

In the case of the Kutubu people, F. E. Williams thought it "perfectly clear that these artefacts ... were not expressly made for the purpose, but merely adapted to it," while Professor R. N. H. and Mrs. S. Bulmer have argued that generally

The subject of this "Newsletter"

> "these implements ... date from a period in Highlands prehistory when root crops (taro, yams, and Pueraria) or bananas were being cultivated, but when the natural vegetation of the area still provided an important part of the diet, and before sweet potato cultivation [which is between 350 and 2,000 years old in New Guinea, more probably the former] permitted the extensive settlement of the higher-altitude areas. Possibly, the widespread manufacture and practical use of mortars and pestles ceased with the general improvement in food supplies brought about by intensive sweet potato cultivation, though the destruction by agricultural clearing of uncultivated or semicultivated nut and seed bearing plants could also have rendered this technology obsolete."

The Huli have no tradition of manufacturing mortars and pestles, nor of their being traded in from other areas, although the common origin and name they give the two provide one of the strongest

Two non-traditional forms of personal adornment:

lens-less spectacles ...

pieces of available evidence that the mortar and pestle were, in fact, once parts of a common system rather than accidentally associated ritual objects.

The Huli call their mortars by the name ni tangki, and their pestles, which are usually egg-shaped stones, ni havane. Although the two are quite closely linked together through their common association with ni, they are, in fact, only two elements in a much wider system of stones employed for ritual purposes by the Huli. Translated literally, the two terms mean "hat of the sun" (ni tangki), and "egg of the sun" (ni havane). Tangki is also the term used to refer to the human hair wigs (or "hats") worn, and splendidly decorated with flowers, by Huli men. Havane is the general word for "egg". Ni is not just the sun, but also a special, very important, spirit.

According to Huli tradition, the two objects both came from the sun — they broke off in the very far-distant past, and landed in the bush, where the Huli found them. Now, every major kin-group (and some individuals too) owns one of each, and performs special rituals for, and with, it. Or, rather, every major kin-group had and used them until Christian missionaries arrived in the area, and ordered their destruction, during the 1950s. Now, they have either been discarded, destroyed, or are being gradually sold for cash (which is how I came to purchase mine).

Their Uses

Before contact, those Huli men who became important leaders earned their followings and reputations. They did not accede to a position, or inherit an established office. The sons of big men obviously had some advantages (their father's name, access to his pigs and shells, etc.) over their age-mates in becoming influential, but that was all. A man who wished to become known as a waijeli (that is, an orator and skilful fighter, able and brave enough to kill, adept at avoiding others' arrows), or a homogo

(a man with many pigs and wives, and a lavish giver of pigs at the appropriate festivals) needed to be clever and resourceful. He could become a waijeli or a homogo only through public recognition of his achievements. There was no formal position or fixed criterion of relative accomplishment that rendered him important.

There was, however, at least one man in most of the larger kin- and settlement-groups (or "parishes"), whose title was a product of ability as well as training in specific skills by his elders, the halagali. It was he who had the requisite knowledge and insights to divine the sources of disease. He alone could say whether, and then how, ni tangki and ni havane could be used. He did not look after these objects so much as direct his community to find, and then to use, them.

It is unclear (at least to me) to what extent each separate stone, or just each class of stone, was considered to be inhabited by a separate spirit, or tama. According to Glasse,

> "A portion of [what he heard pronounced as] dama becomes embodied in a material object, generally a stone artefact, an oddly shaped natural stone, or a fossil. One dama may be associated with many stone objects, yet an invisible residue is omnipresent."

My particular guess here is that each ni tangki and ni havane (of which the latter is reputedly the more potent) contain, or partake of, the spirit of ni, the sun deity, and a modest primus inter pares of the deities as a whole, as well as of a number of specific, lesser tama. The use of both kinds of object in the divination of the causes of disease, and the Huli's tendency not to attribute specific symptoms or illnesses to particular deities (according to Glasse), together lend credence to this view.

Generally, again in Glasse's words, the Huli

> "conceive the dama to be invisible deities possessing supra-physical powers. Dama control the weather, causing too much or too little rain. They attack humans, sometimes capriciously, causing sickness, infertility or death. At times

... and a soap-wrapper in one's wig.

they punish certain offences, or cause suffering at the bidding of sorcerers. Most dama are capable of causing both good and evil ...."

Ni havane (the pestle) and ni tangki (the mortar) are both ritually powerful objects, specifically in curing illness. They are also used — although I have only sketchy data on these uses — in fertility rites performed for ni, in warfare, and as memorials for the dead, when, 15 months after a man's death, the two objects are brought out, decorated, and then placed near a raised platform on which rests the freshly painted head of the deceased big man for the duration of a singsing during which his pigs are slaughtered in the dead owner's honour.

Both objects are generally kept hidden, out of sight, and sheltered from the rain, in the bush, in a crevice in a rock, in a hole in a tree, or perhaps under a small, specially made, bush covering. They are also kept apart unless they have been properly decorated, when the pestle is placed in the mortar by a halagali. The place where they are kept is secluded, forbidden ground — only young unmarried men (the sexually pure?) and the halagali can gaze upon, or touch, either stone. If a married man or a woman were to see ni tangki or ni havane when they are ritually decorated, his or her stomach would swell up, to make him or her sick.

The main specific use of both objects is as part of a range of stones employed in curing illness.

If a man is ill, he must go to a halagali, who then divines the cause or causes of the illness. As described to, but not seen by, me, the halagali firstly obtains some white earth (clay?), which he kneads, and digs into, with a stick. As he works the earth, he thinks gradually of the various possible (combinations of) causes of the sickness — ni tangki (a mortar), ni havane (a pestle), erepore (a round, crescent-shaped stone), kuruwali (a long, crocodile-like stone, with two arm-like appendages and a "tail"), lidu (a round stone, longer than it is wide, and larger than ni havane), liduki (literally, "lidu's bone", but also really a stone, larger than ni havane, and longer too than it is wide), and a host of ghosts and other spirits (or tama) that have no physical manifestations. When the halagali's stick is caught fast in the earth which he is working, the object or other supernatural phenomenon (such as a ghost, or the spirit of a dead man) or sorcerer of which he is then thinking is divined to be the source of the enquirer's affliction.

When the source or sources are divined, the sick man is sent off to find the objects which the halagali says have caused the illness. If ni tangki or ni havane or any other of the stone objects is responsible for the man's illness, the relevant object will have a small chip in it — a sign that the object is the cause of the illness. (The mortar shown on page 5 is quite markedly chipped around the rim, which is why a local kiap had refused to buy it as imperfect, although each chip, in fact, represents a serious illness, if not a death.)

When the objects, spirits, and/or sorcerers that caused the illness have been found, a pig is killed, and pieces of its meat are offered to each of the ritual objects concerned. Pig grease is smeared over the pestle, and pig grease mixed with a red paint (made from a yellow earth, which is baked until it turns red before the mixing — ochre?) is smeared over ni tangki. Separate pieces of pig are cooked, and then consumed by the halagali and the close kinsmen of the afflicted individual. If the ritual is performed in time, the patient should — but does not always — survive. If he survives, but is not cured, the foregoing process of divination is repeated until the real cause of the illness is discovered.

Conclusion

Mortars and pestles did, then, perform a severely practical function in Huli society, as objects inhabited by spirits, and as one means of assuaging evil tama. In a world in which what we term the physical and spiritual cohabited on equal, interacting terms, it is a mistake to conclude, as some outsiders have done, that they had no practical employment. And yet, compared with the uses to which stone mortars and pestles have been put in other parts of the world, one can only really conclude with much the same questions and speculations about these objects as have other alien observers: where do they come from? who made them, and for what more conventional purpose(s)? are they relics of some past inhabitants (perhaps grain-cultivators) of whom we know no more? or have they simply fallen into some forms of disuse of whose more practical antecedents we have still to learn?

Yours Sincerely,

Edward Wolfers.

Postscript

Although the mortar and pestle which prompted this "Newsletter" are in no way exceptional for Papua and New Guinea, except insofar as there are no detailed, published descriptions of any from the Huli area, the following data are appended for those readers who may have a technical interest in them.

According to Mr. Warren Manser (of the Department of Chemistry and Earth Science, University of Papua and New Guinea), who kindly examined my mortar and pestle for me, the mortar is composed of the basic plutonic rock Gabbro, while the pestle is of hornfelsed mudstone. The pestle shows no signs of having been at all artificially shaped or crafted.

As regards their measurements: the diameter of the scooped out portion of the mortar is between $7\frac{1}{4}$ and $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches (the circumference is uneven), the scoop is $1\frac{5}{8}$ inches deep at its most deeply gouged point, and the entire object is about $4\frac{5}{8}$ inches in height, with a rounded base. The pestle is 3 and 3/16 inches in length, and about 2 and 19/32 inches at its widest point. The mortar weighs approximately 15 lbs 4 ozs, and the pestle 12 ozs.

As far as I have been able to discover, no mortars and pestles have so far been found that can usefully be carbon-dated.

The scholarly works referred to in the text are:

Susan and Ralph Bulmer, "The Prehistory of the Australian New Guinea Highlands", in J. B. Watson (ed.), "New Guinea: the Central Highlands", American Anthropologist Special Publication 66(4), Part 2, August 1964;

R. M. Glasse, "The Huli of the Southern Highlands", in P. Lawrence and M. J. Meggitt (eds.), Gods Ghosts and Men in Melanesia: Some Religions of Australian New Guinea and the New Hebrides, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1965; and

F. E. Williams, "Natives of Lake Kutubu, Papua", The Oceania Monographs No. 6, The Australian National Research Council, Sydney, 1940.

Finally I should like to thank the following for their help:

Messrs. Matiabe Yuwi (M. H. A., Tari), Andrew Andagari Wabiria (M. H. A., Koroba, and Assistant Ministerial Member for Lands), Agobe and Tigi (of Hauwa, Tari) for their re-telling of the story of ni tangki and ni havane, Mr. Warren Manser for his comments on the geological characteristics of the artefacts concerned, and Dr. Anton Ploeg for his criticisms of my text.

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