

# Baskets and Beads from Behind the Bird's Head: Exploring Relationships in Northwest New Guinea through the William Louis Abbott Collection of 1914

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## Research Question:

What does W.L. Abbott's collection from his journey to the northwest coast of New Guinea in 1914 tell us about Abbott's collecting methods and local communities' relationships with the outside world?

## Background:

William Louis Abbott (1860-1936) first voyaged to the southwest Pacific at the turn of the 20th century and spent ten years traveling through the Southeast Asian island groups, collecting mammal and bird specimens, as well as ethnographic artifacts (Taylor 1985). In January of 1914 Abbott visited the Bird's Head region and north coast of New Guinea on a steamer cruise with his sister, and he collected some 386 ethnographic objects, and took some 52 photographs.

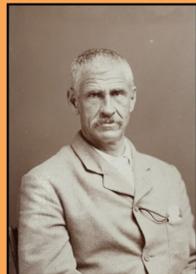


Figure 1: Dr. William Louis Abbott (NAA)

The northwest coast of New Guinea for centuries has been a part of dynamic regional and global exchange networks involving Makassarese, Buginese, Javanese, Moluccan, Chinese, Malay, and Arab traders. During the 17th century the Dutch East Indies Company began exerting control over these networks. In 1855 Protestant Pietists missionaries from Germany established a station on Dorei Bay. They were bolstered by Dutch members of the Utrecht Protestant Mission Union in 1862. The Dutch regional presence was solidified in 1898 with the establishment of a permanent government post (Taylor 1991; Welsch 1998; Moore 2003).

During this period of transition numerous naturalists visited the region in search of birds of paradise among other things. Prominent among them were: A.R. Wallace (1858), O. Beccari and L.M. d'Albertis (1872-73), and F.H.H. Guillemard (1883). In 1903 the Dutch began to sponsor several official government surveys, which further raised the scientific profile of the Bird's Head region. Abbott came through the region in the wake of all of these expeditions and travellers, undoubtedly influenced by their reports (Frodin 2006).



Figure 2: Map of the Bird's Head and North coast of New Guinea displaying the origins of objects in the 1914 Abbott collection. Abbott's route: Ternate, Halmahera, Sorong, Dorei Bay, Roon Island, Biak, Wakde, and Humboldt Bay. The historical names of localities are in brackets.

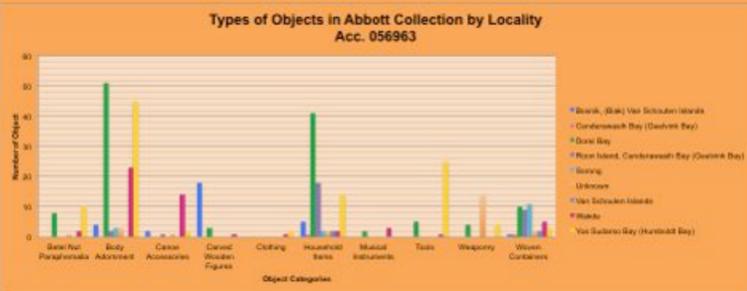


Figure 3: Bar graph showing types of objects in the Abbott collection by locality. The object categories are functional categories made for the purposes of this graph. As such the woven containers category, for example, contains woven bags, pouches, wallets, baskets, and basket trays.

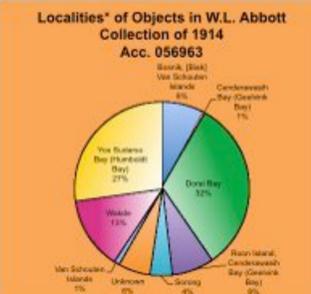


Figure 4: Pie chart showing percentage of objects collected per locality in North New Guinea in the Abbott collection.

\*Historical names of localities are in brackets

## The Collection:

On March 22, 1914, Abbott wrote acting head curator of Anthropology at the United States National Museum, Walter Hough, about the 386 ethnographic objects that he collected in New Guinea. While the letter provides some useful hints about the trip, it provides no details. To date this is the only extensive written material about this trip found in the National Anthropological Archives (NAA). Abbott's trip, however, can be reconstructed through his collection and through materials associated with A.B. Lewis of the Chicago Field Museum who traveled through the region by steamer from 1912 to 1913. Comparing their collections' localities reveals that they travelled similar routes, moreover Lewis' journal indicates they interacted with the same people (Welsch 1998).

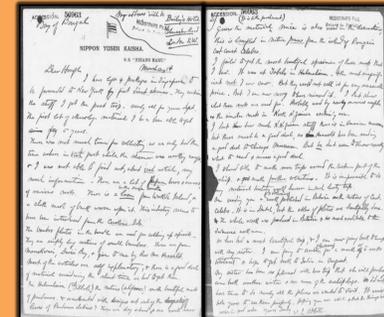


Figure 5: Letter to Walter Hough from W.L. Abbott referring to collections made in New Guinea, March 22, 1914. Acc. No. 56963.



Figure 6: Abbott's photographs of Malay traders and West Papuans with crates of trade goods at Wakde (NAA).



Figure 7: Image of carved canoe ornament of a bird with a beaded necklace atop a human from Wakde (E283866) above photographs of a similar prow ornament taken by Abbott in Wakde.



Figure 8: Basket of dyed woven pandanus leaves from Sorong Island (E284020). Used as poster background.

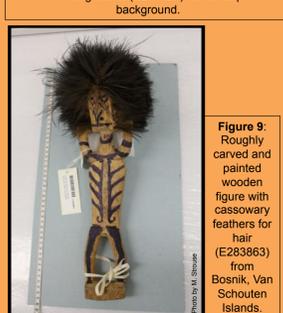


Figure 9: Roughly carved and painted wooden figure with cassowary feathers for hair (E283863) from Bosnik, Van Schouten Islands.

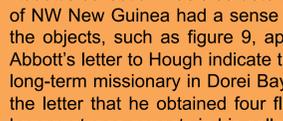


Figure 10: Photograph of a man from Humboldt Bay taken by Abbott alongside the star shaped earring (E283792) and armbands made from coils of rattan (E283783) that he appears to be wearing.

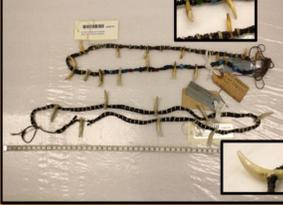


Figure 12: Dog's teeth necklace with colored beads of Chinese origin (E283773), next to a necklace made with glass dog's teeth (E283774) from Humboldt Bay.

The majority of the objects in the Abbott collection were obtained in Dorei Bay (32%), followed by Humboldt Bay (27%), and Wakde (13%) (see figure 4). Abbott's ability to collect was dictated by his steamer's schedule, and the nature of the localities he visited. As he notes in his letter to Hough, "There was not much time for collecting as we had only the time ashore in each port while the steamer was loading cargo and I was not able to find out about each article, very much information." (Abbott 1914). For example, Dorei Bay was the site of the government and mission station, the presence of which may have helped dispose local populations to trade. Abbott collected both by walking through localities visited by boat, directly from individuals who visited the ship, and from Europeans who he met. His photographs point to these different collecting realities. On Wakde Abbott collected from community members in their village (see figure 6), while on Roon Island, it appears he never left the ship. Forensic analysis of Abbott's photographs indicate that he collected objects worn by individuals he encountered (see figures 10 and 11). Abbott was predisposed to collect objects that he could easily store or carry. These include body adornment (34% of the collection), household items (22.5%) woven containers (11%), disassembled tools (8%), carved figurines (6%), weaponry (6%), betel nut paraphernalia (5.4%), canoe accessories (5.2%) musical instruments (1.2%), and clothing (0.7%). As was standard for the time, Abbott obtained these objects with requisite trade goods (tobacco, cloth, knives, beads, etc.).

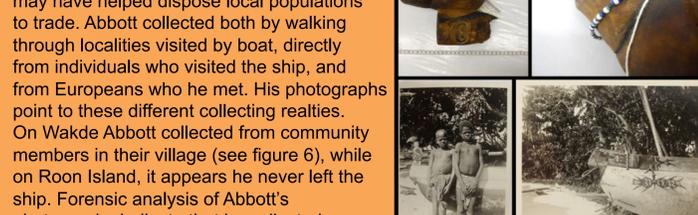


Figure 11: Photograph of a man from Humboldt Bay taken by Abbott alongside the armband (E283788), woven bag (E283708), and belt decorated with nassa shells (E283745) from the collection that he appears to be wearing.

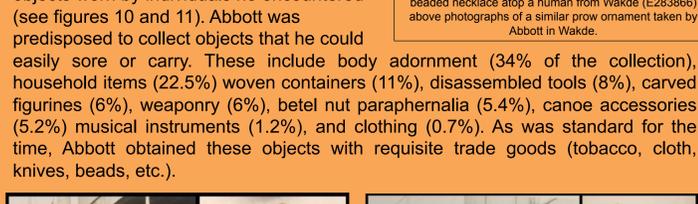


Figure 10: Photograph of a man from Humboldt Bay taken by Abbott alongside the star shaped earring (E283792) and armbands made from coils of rattan (E283783) that he appears to be wearing.



Figure 13: Woven basketry armband onto which are two circular porcelain faux shells (E283788) alongside dyed woven bark fiber armband onto which are two modified shells (E283286) from Humboldt Bay.

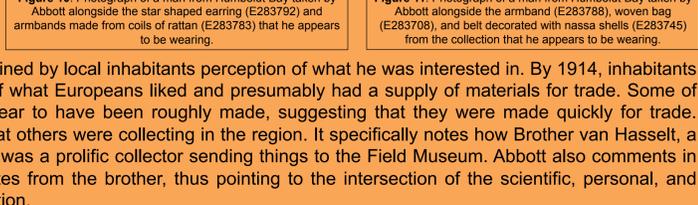


Figure 14: Forehead ornament decorated with nassa shells and colored beads of Chinese and European origin (E283757) from Wakde.

## Analysis and Findings:

All museum collections materialize different relationships and agencies. Made from a diversity of materials—Chinese and European beads and trade cloth alongside locally made bark cloth and modified shells—the various types of body adornment and woven bags speak to the cross-cultural forces that forged the material culture of the West Papuans Abbott visited. For at least a hundred years, foreign goods were readily incorporated into people's art forms, as seen in figures 12, 13, 14, and 15. Shifting religious, technological, and cultural forces also induced communities to part with their objects. For example, the availability of steel may have helped convince communities to trade their stone tools to Abbott in Humboldt Bay.



Figure 15: Hexagonal basket with made from woven pandanus leaves, decorated with red and orange trade cloth and black, white, and rainbow colored foreign beads (E284023)



Figure 16: Thin woven belt decorated with native black beads and white nassa shells (E153093) presumably collected by Beccari from Djemma, Merat Island, near Wakde alongside a similar larger woven belt (E283826) collected by Abbott in Humboldt Bay.

Local transformations are also revealed through comparisons with materials sent by the Royal Zoological Museum of Florence (Acc. 024918) as part of an exchange (see figure 16). In 1914 Abbott collected nine similar belts—seven from Wakde and two from Humboldt Bay—to one collected by Beccari which was noted as "very rare" in the 1870s. While the increase in belts may reflect Abbott's tenacity as a collector, the higher number of belts is more likely indicative of the shifting local value of these objects and men's willingness to trade them.

By 1914 Christianity had become more widespread in the coastal area of Geelvink Bay, which undoubtedly influenced what people were willing to trade. In 1908, communities in Biak requested Brother van Hasselt's presence to witness their acceptance of the Gospel, during which they demonstrated their new faith by burning their korwar, carved wooden relics housing spirits of the deceased (Rutherford 2006). This event is significant, as the destruction of these ritual objects may have played a major role in Abbott's ability to collect so many korwar figures from the Van Schouten Islands. Often instead of destroying an object, communities traded them to visiting Europeans (Küchler 1997). Van Hasselt used these opportunities to collect materials, and it may be that this is how he obtained the spirit flutes (E283991), which he later gave to Abbott.



Figure 17: Group of korwar figures

## Further Research:

- Identify and establish the source of trade cloth used in the objects.
- Conduct research into the European industry for creating glass and porcelain shells and dogs teeth for trade.
- Conduct analysis on the pigments used on the objects and determine if the dyes and paints are of local or foreign origin.
- Examine more correspondence between Abbott and others to determine a pattern in his collecting.
- Conduct more research into the indigenous meanings of the objects Abbott collected.
- Determine a more exact itinerary of Abbott's trip.
- Compare Abbott's collection to those at the Field Museum made by Lewis and Van Hasselt.

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