

Form and Decoration of Arrows from the Highlands of Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT. This study concerns the form and decoration of arrows from the highlands of Papua New Guinea. The morphology of a sample of 834 arrows is described. The decorative carvings on fore-shafts and heads are analysed in terms of 13 elements and variants of these. The combinations of elements into design patterns is described and their geographic distribution analysed. Variations in both morphology and design are found to correlate with language family boundaries for the most part, but the most clearly marked boundary lies between Central and West Central language family areas.

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KEYWORDS: arrows, form, decoration, Papua New Guinea, language boundaries, physiographic boundaries.

The use of bows and arrows for fighting, hunting and display is almost universal in Pacific islands' cultures, and is certainly so throughout the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Being among the most common artefacts and being, to many European eyes unusual and decorative, arrows have been frequently collected. Museums in many parts of the world hold large collections of arrows, which have, however, rarely been the subject of detailed study. This work is a contribution both to the systematic description of these artefacts and to an understanding of the relationship between the distribution of arrow forms and designs, and geographic and linguistic entities.

This study was begun originally as an M.A. thesis (Bush, 1976). The present publication has been extensively amended and re-written, especially in the light of new interpretations of the linguistic data. There has, however, been little modification of the analyses of arrows.

STUDY AREA

Geography. The highlands of Papua New Guinea cover an extensive area of the cordillera that stretches for 960 km and forms the 'backbone' of Papua New Guinea and extends into Irian Jaya. It is a complex

system of broken ranges, forming mountain barriers which frequently separate broad upland valleys, and is the watershed for many river systems flowing north, south and east. The ranges that form the cordillera rise to great heights — the highest, Mt Wilhelm at 4,438 m, being part of the Bismarck Range, an arm of which forms the Sepik-Wahgi Divide. Mt Kubor, 4,290 m, is the highest mountain on the southern side of the cordillera that partly encloses the Wahgi and Chimbu River systems.

The eastern boundary of the highlands is relatively well defined by the steep scarp known as the Ramu-Markham Fall. In strict geographic terms the western end lies in Irian Jaya at about 135°E. This study is, however, concerned with that part of the cordillera which lies east of the Papua New Guinea – Irian Jaya border, and particularly with that lying east of the Strickland Gorge.

Within these geographic limits is an important physiographic division, the Chimbu-Asaro Divide. This mountain chain runs roughly north-south, separating the Asaro River valley to the east, from the Chimbu River system to the west. This divide is considered a significant boundary in cultural terms.

Linguistics. Between the Asaro and Chimbu valleys there is a 'linguistic break' (Read, 1954:7). This break