

A Century of Collecting: Colonial Collectors in Southwest New Britain

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ABSTRACT. The study of material culture has waxed and waned in importance in anthropology, unlike archaeology where it has always been central. However, much of the anthropology carried out on the south coast of New Britain has concerned the collection of material culture. We survey a century of collecting on the coast ranging from the large, well-organized expeditions of the German period, through a number of individual collectors both amateur and professional from the German period to the Second World War, and we finish with the more minor forms of collecting taking place in the quite different political climate after the War. We show that the study of past collections can throw light on a number of histories: the biographies of individuals, both local and colonial, the histories of institutions and disciplines, and the history of change along the south coast of New Britain itself.

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The first archaeologist to carry out systematic research on the south coast of New Britain was Jim Specht, but, as he was aware, he was part of a longer tradition of research and collecting. We review collection practices in this region by looking at collectors who visited between the 1880s and 1990s (Table 1). This is one area of Papua New Guinea where material culture has always been the focal point of study, linking anthropological and archaeological work. We focus on the south coast of West New Britain, between the Arawe Islands and Kandrian—often known as the Arawe region.

Objects in common use on Arawe today include women's ornaments (turtle-shell armbands and earrings, hair ornaments, necklaces, and grass skirts); men's ornaments

(earrings, pig's-tusk, cassowary-quill belts and barkcloth belts), and bags once common attire but recently only used in ceremonies (Fig. 1). Spears and shields are now only used for ceremonies, and stone axes, adzes and obsidian all went out of use early in the twentieth century. Wooden items range from out-rigger canoes to bowls exchanged in bride-price which are used for making sago pudding (*sapela*); these are made or bought from Siassi Islanders at the western tip of New Britain. Other containers include coiled-cane baskets also from the western end of New Britain, clay pots from the north coast of New Guinea and local coconut-leaf baskets. Nets of various shapes are used for catching fish, birds or pigs and some people still make looped vine-string bags. Exchange items include shell money, *mokmok*