

ANTHROPOLOGY

African Diet Studied

► THE HEREROS of Africa should be prime candidates for heart attacks if diet alone means anything, for they eat practically nothing but meat, fat and milk products.

On such fare, according to much Western medical research, the veins of the Hereros should be lined with cholesterol leading to heart disease and death at an early age for a large percentage of the population.

Nevertheless, the Hereros do not appear to have an abnormally large number of deaths from heart disease, Dr. Gordon D. Gibson, anthropologist of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C., found on a nine months' stay in South West Africa and Bechuanaland where the Hereros live.

Dr. Gibson told SCIENCE SERVICE hospital records in the area do not show that many Hereros died of heart disease. The most common serious diseases in the area are pneumonia, tuberculosis, malaria and venereal diseases.

Dr. Gibson, his wife and assistant Bethune M. Gibson, also an anthropologist, and their two children spent nine months in Herero country studying the tribe's diet and social system. They brought back with them many samples of Herero life, clothing, ornaments and utensils that will be exhibited in a new hall on Africa at the Smithsonian.

Dr. Gibson also collected samples of and information about the various foods eaten by the Hereros in an attempt to find out why and how the Hereros escape the scourge of heart disease known in the West.

He and Mrs. Gibson found that some of civilization's products had reached even the remotest areas. They found that men, women and children smoke in even the most remote Herero tribe they visited. Coffee, tea, and especially sugar, were desired by these Africans who did not show as much interest in salt—an old stand-by carried by missionaries in the past, together with colored beads.

The Gibsons visited three Herero areas of different degrees of westernization. In one, the police zone of South West Africa (under South African rule), the people had had considerable contact with whites. Many of the huts are built on the Western square plan in contrast to the local-style round huts. In addition, enameled, store-bought cooking vessels are used instead of the old wooden ones.

Another group in Bechuanaland has had a contact with whites in the past and is in an earlier stage of acculturation. However, they do wear the European clothing introduced by the whites around 1850 as do the more civilized groups.

A third group visited by Dr. Gibson lives in the northwest corner of South West

Africa just south of the Angola border. This group was the least westernized, wearing leather clothing and heavy ornaments of iron beads made from European scrap iron worked by wandering smiths from other areas.

Dr. Gibson found that all three groups of Hereros rely for their main source of food on their cattle, sheep and goats. One Herero told Dr. Gibson that meat is food, but corn is just something to fill the stomach. The Hereros sometimes do have to eat corn and pumpkins, which they grow, and wild-growing greens, roots and berries when their milk and meat supply does not hold out. Sometimes the herds are reduced when grazing is bad because of poor rainfall. Cattle diseases also diminish the herds.

When food is needed "to fill the stomach" Hereros cook a green, *Amaranthus thunbergi*, called omboa by the natives. A berry, various species of the genus *Grewia*, that tastes like the currant but has larger seeds is also collected.

However, the Hereros prefer meat and thickened milk that is shaken in large calabashes with leaves and roots for 15 to 20 minutes until it thickens. They also like a clear butter that is boiled until all the water disappears. This butter is eaten "straight" by the spoonful but is also used on greens. The butter is stored for long periods in large cowhide vessels with a seal of mud and cow dung that keeps it from getting rancid too quickly.

Several months of detailed study will be necessary before any conclusions can be reached about the relationship between the Herero diet and incidence of heart disease. Dr. Gibson said the reason Hereros do not have as much heart disease could possibly be due to a racial factor, to exercise, or to the early mortality due to other diseases.

The study was carried out by the Smithsonian Institution with supporting grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health.

• Science News Letter, 80:239 October 7, 1961

VITAL STATISTICS

Pay Earners Live Longer Now Than 75 Years Ago

► THE AVERAGE American wage earner can expect to live twice as long as his forefathers did about 75 years ago and a little longer than the average person in the United States today.

Statisticians of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, New York, report that the average life span of its millions of industrial policyholders reached a new high of 70.5 years in 1960, more than twice the longevity during 1879-94, the earliest period for which data are available. The largest gains are in the younger ages where mortality has been traditionally high, increasing 5.9 years for the five-year-old during the last two decades.

The gain for those 65 years of age for the same period was 2.3 years. The life expectancy of the group as a whole, which was six years less than that of the average population about 50 years ago, is now slightly greater.

• Science News Letter, 80:239 October 7, 1961



AFRICAN HEREROS—A Herero woman, left, is seen wearing the European style clothing brought to Africa around 1850. The headdress is an adaptation from the European style. Above, two Herero women from South West Africa are mending a woman's cape later brought back to the U. S. for exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution.