ETHNOLOGY

White Men Seem Stingy

Advent of whites in South Pacific Islands upset native economic balance which depended on giving. New diseases were brought in, but cannibalism wiped out.

➤ IF OUR SOLDIERS in the South Pacific are finding the cheerful, fuzzy-haired natives hospitable and courteous, this is partly because the black man has now grown accustomed to the strange, stingy habits of the white man.

In the old days, if a soldier had refused to give away his rifle, machete, or any other gadget which attracted the fancy of a native, he was apt to be regarded as a shiftless fellow, with no social standing. For prestige in those islands depended—and still does, to a large extent—not on how much you could accumulate but how much you could give away.

The prominent men in the community, the chiefs, were those who gave the most valuable presents—the finest woven mats, the most pungent scented cocoanut oil, the biggest turtles. Any citizen was entitled to ask for, and receive, anything he wanted from his large clan of blood relatives. This kept the slow-tempoed tropical islanders hopping. It was hard enough to wrest food for themselves and their immediate families, and to save up enough for the innumerable feasts celebrating weddings, pregnancy, birth and all the other festive occasions. To keep up his social position, a Melanesian had to give away much more than that.

First the missionaries tried to graft European habits of thrift and industry (that is, industry for oneself and immediate family) on this communal system. Then the British administrators, in good-natured concern over the feast system, which periodically cleaned the host out of all his food, succeeded pretty well in undermining this system of values. In the "famine isles" of Fiji and New Hebrides, for instance, the groom's family used to be economically exhausted for months after a big wedding. Also from worthy motives, the British distributed rice during hurricanes and subsequent famines.

As a result, the delicate economic balance was upset. The intensively competitive system of giving and receiving had worked out pretty evenly in the long run. But when their gift-giving prestige was questioned, the authority of the big men, the chiefs, was also undermined.

In Fiji the natives no longer worked so hard; their incentive had been taken away. They began to solicit more than they gave, and to solicit from any newcomer, rather than just blood-relatives. Western prosperity came to the islands with the cocoanut-oil boom after the last war, and the traders' "store-bought" goods began to seem much more glamorous than home-made mats. But the great depression hit Fiji in 1931, and since then the suddenly-deprived natives have largely gone back to their neglected gardens, their woodwork, barkcloth, and canoes. They still depend on metal axes, cloth, soap and cooking pots from the western world, however. They learned from missionaries that soap was better form than their sandalwood oil and fine, pungent scents.

Meanwhile, about 65 years ago the British had imported Indian labor to cultivate the neglected sugar fields, and the fast-multiplying Indians have all but crowded the Fijian off his isles.

Another unfortunate result of the white man in the south Pacific has been the disease he invariably carries with him. While the natives had suffered from stomach complaints, dysentery, colds and skin diseases of various malignant sorts, the white man brought syphilis, tuberculosis, and what we lightly call "children's diseases."

The worst epidemic Fiji ever had was a bout of measles in 1875, the year after Great Britain annexed the islands. This wiped out one-third of the population, and aged Fijians still tell of the tragic mass burials on their islands.

The white man has generally succeeded, however, in stamping out cannibalism, particularly in the Fijis and New Caledonia, although New Guinea head-hunters went on the warpath last year, when the British withdrew before the Jap advance, and there may be more outbreaks. But everything considered, anthropologists usually agree that the white man has taken more from the Pacific isles than he has given.

Science News Letter, November 28, 1942

● RADIO

Saturday, December 5, 1:30 p.m., EWT

"Adventures in Science," with Watson Davis, director of Science Service, over Columbia Broadcasting System.

Dr. Leverett D. Bristol, medical member, Office of Price Administration, will talk on the health aspects of fuel rationing.

Monday, November 30, 9:15 a.m., EWT; 2:30 p.m., CWT; 9:30 a.m., MWT; and 1:30 p.m., PWT

Science at Work, School of the Air of the Americas over the Columbia Broadcasting System, presented in cooperation with the National Education Association, Science Service and Science Clubs of America.

"The Magic of Matter" will be the subject of the program.

RESOURCES

Persimmon Leaves Are Rich in Vitamin C

➤ WHEN TEA joins coffee on the list of scarcities, don't worry. Brew yourself a tasty cup from persimmon leaves—if you live where persimmons grow. It's good for you; full of scurvy-preventing vitamin C.

Prof. C. G. Vinson of the University of Missouri and Prof. F. B. Cross of Oklahoma A. and M. College report (*Science,* Nov. 6), that green persimmon leaves are rich in this essential vitamin. Freshly dried leaves sometimes have an even higher concentration. Green fruits also contain the vitamin though not as much of it as the leaves; the vitamin apparently disappears to a large extent as the fruit ripens.

Tea made from chopped-up dried leaves was found to be a good vitamin source, and tasted rather well with a little sugar—"similar to sassafras tea." Real tea was also tested, but proved to have only about one per cent as much vitamin C as the decoction from persimmon leaves.

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