

# A Farewell Present from New Guinea

IN MEMORY OF TOM HARRISSON, OUR  
CONVERSATIONS AND A CORRESPONDENCE  
THROUGH MANY YEARS ON BEADS AND  
GLASS "BANGLES"

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IN 1958 J. van Baal retired as governor from the Jotafa Bay, Humboldt Bay region, formerly Netherlands New Guinea. As a sign of appreciation and gratitude, the chief of Tobati village presented him with a green-blue glass ring, kept in a ceremonial carrying bag (Plate Ia-b). The latter, richly decorated, is a unique specimen, the origin of which is unknown. As Galis states (1955: 119-122), carrying bags are much in use and serve different purposes in the work of the kitchen, house, and field. It is the task of the women to plait them from pandanus fiber. Formerly the village chiefs were entitled to more elaborate bags, sometimes bearing clan motifs such as a rainbow or leguan. Misuse of this privilege was subject to punishment. The trapezoid-shaped bag, in which the ring is fastened on a bent stick, must present a colorful appearance. Except for the carrying band, which is of a different, possibly imported material, the bag is plaited from pandanus fiber. It is decorated with bird of paradise feathers, shells, multicolored small glass beads, and dog teeth (canines, which are fastened to each other in pairs). The beads are no doubt the most valuable items of the bags' decoration. They rank according to size and color. Beads, which are either individual or communal property, are in use for the payment of adat obligations and at the law court. As Galis (1955) states, they have become rare since the beginning of the present century, and accordingly have risen in value. Beads are considered to be of mythical origin and are believed to have been given

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Plate Ia Green-blue glass ring from Tobati village, Humboldt Bay, New Guinea. Outer diameter 10.2 cm, inner diameter 7 cm, thickness of glass 1.6 cm, weight 200 gr. Courtesy Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam.

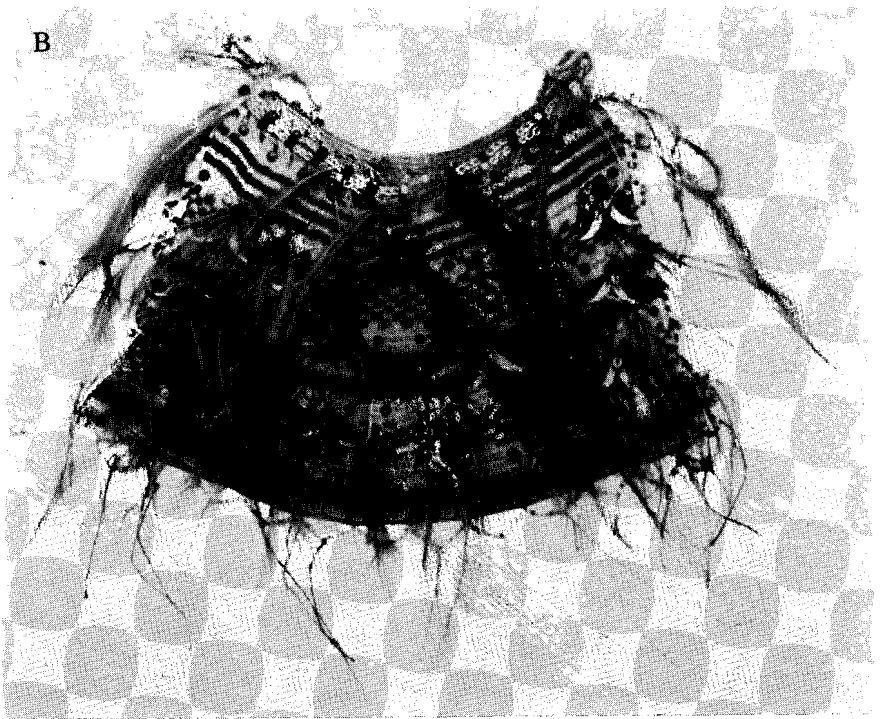


Plate Ib Ceremonial carrying bag ornamented with bird of paradise feathers, beads, shells, and dog teeth. Courtesy Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam.

by spirits or dropped from the sky. In size and color they are similar to those found on the Moluccas and in Borneo.

Dog teeth are valued for necklaces, and as only the pair of canines is used, a considerable time passes until such an ornament is completed. Plate *Ib*, upper right, shows a pair of the teeth.

Glass rings in the possession of the natives occur first in Western literature in the work of Rumphius (1746), who stayed on Ambon about 1690, and in the voluminous records of Valentijn (1724–26). Valentijn was “predicant” on Ambon around 1710. Both authors mention rings for Ceram, the Aru, Kei, and Timorlaut islands.

At the time of the arrival of the Dutch East India Company in the early 17th century, glass rings belonged to the established treasures of these islands. Rumphius narrates that in 1635 Simon Cos, later governor of Ambon, was obliged to take a ring away from a village on the north coast of Ceram, because the neighboring villages had started a war for its possession. The village chief was much displeased and explained that such a ring was worth a hundred slaves, or rather a whole village. More than a century later, an analogous event is reported by van Hoeffell (after van der Sande) for the year 1893. He confiscated a ring for the possession of which a quarrel had arisen between two villages on the northeast coast of Ceram. During this quarrel several murders had been committed.

Both Rumphius and Valentijn stress the importance of the green rings. At that time traders ordered green rings to be manufactured in the Netherlands to facilitate dealing with the natives, who, however, distinguished these imitations from the ancient specimens. Rumphius emphasizes the high esteem in which the rings were held (see de Beauclair 1962). They were regarded as holy objects and amulets, the stripes and bubbles of the mass being of high significance. The people believed that they had originally issued from the sea, or from the heads of snakes and wild boars in the mountains. In general it is assumed that the rings came from China or possibly from the Near East by early trade, the routes passing northwest New Guinea before Indonesian navigation to the west began. Meyer (1884: 15) sees in the presence of Chinese jars a proof for Chinese origin of the rings as well.

As is evident from the foregoing information, the earliest reports of glass rings, dating from the beginning of the 17th century, all refer to the Moluccas. For the northwest of New Guinea we have to deal with statements about rings from much later periods. Van Hasselt (1910: 119) relates that the rings were kept under the protection of the adat chief in the communal house. They went from one village head to the other, according to the rank of the villages. They served different purposes, such as paying damages for slain enemies, buying prisoners and, in times of famine, acquiring food. The rings were said to possess magic power, and when the chief went traveling, he took two rings along to protect himself against attacks. The rings also functioned as marriage gifts or as bride price. Women wore the rings as breast ornaments. According to Galis (1955), Tobati is the only village where the natives still own rings. The green ring that van der Sande (1907) describes was the treasure of Tobati village. Rings were always tightly wrapped in long strips of fiber. The rings were known under individual names and each had its history. While on the Moluccas the rings are spoken of as *mamacur* or *macur*, on New Guinea they are called *khas*, with slight dialectal variations for the different villages. It was in 1958 that van Baal received the gift from Tobati, but the history of the rings

continues into the present. In a letter dated 12 September 1977, Wilhelm Solheim informed me that "large blue and green glass rings (the blue most valuable), to wear around the upper arm, are still an important part of the bride price in the Lake Sentani area of Irian Jaya when we were there." This was in 1976. [We were shown four blue, green, and white arm rings in Kwadawari (northern end of Lake Sentani) when we were making test excavations there in March 1976. Each ring was kept wrapped in a long, narrow cloth and the four were kept with some valuable glass beads in an old biscuit tin which in turn was wrapped in plastic and kept in a basket. This is the same kampong where four bronze artifacts that were found there are kept and carefully guarded by one of the older men of the kampong. Ed.]

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Dr. J. van Baal, now in retirement, was connected with the Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, and the University of Utrecht. My sincere thanks are due him for providing the photographs and a description of the rare objects.

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