Baskets and Beads from Behind the Bird’s Head: Exploring Relationships in Northwest New Guinea through the William Louis Abbott Collection of 1914

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Research Question:
What does W.L. Abbott’s collection from his journey to the northwest coast of New Guinea in 1914 tell us about Abbott’s collecting methods and local communities’ relationships with the outside world?

Background:
William Louis Abbott (1850-1936) first voyaged to the southwest Pacific at the turn of the 20th century and spent ten years among the New Guineans, Malayan, and Arab traders. During the 17th century the Dutch East Indies Company began extending its influence to the region and north coast of New Guinea on a steamer cruise with his brother van Hasselt’s presence to witness their activities. For at least a hundred years, communities in Biak requested trade cars, as well as baskets, and other objects, frequently traded with Abbott’s collection from Humboldt Bay. In 1908, communities in Biak requested trade goods from Abbott and Abbott’s collection of trading objects. In 1914 Christianity had become more widespread in the coastal area of Geelvink Bay, which undoubtedly influenced what people were willing to trade. In 1906, communities in Biak requested trade goods from Abbott and included objects with local significance. For each object, Abbott’s collection was also determined by local inhabitants’ perception of what he was interested in. In the 1914, inhabitants of NW New Guinea had a sense of what Europeans liked and presumably a supply of materials for trade. Some of the objects such as figures 5 to 7 were collected by Abbott and others by local inhabitants suggesting that they were made quickly for trade. Abbott’s letter to Hough indicates that others were collecting in the region. It specifically notes how Brother van Hasselt, a long-term missionary in Donei Bay, was a prolific collector sending things to the Field Museum. Abbott also comments in the letter that he obtained four flutes from the brother, thus pointing to the intersection of the scientific, personal, and technological, and cultural forces that forged the material culture of the West Papuans-Abbott visited. For at least a hundred years, communities in Biak requested trade goods and other objects, frequently traded with Abbott’s collection from Humboldt Bay. For example, the availability of steel may have helped convince communities to trade their stone tools to Abbott in Humboldt Bay.

Further Research:
- Identify and evaluate the source of trade cloth used in the objects.
- Conduct research into the European industry for creating glass and porcelain shells and other novelties.
- Conduct analysis on the pigments used on the objects and determine if the dyes and paints are of local or foreign origin.
- Examine more correspondence between Abbott and others to determine a pattern in his collecting.
- Conduct more research into the indigenous meanings of the objects Abbott collected.
- Determine a more exact itinerary of Abbott’s trip.
- Compare Abbott’s collection to those at the Field Museum made by Lewis and Van Hasselt.

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