

Höltker's Tapa Loincloth from the Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel: Unfolding History

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Introduction

Among the rich collections of the Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel (MEN) is an intriguing small, folded piece of barkcloth from Papua New Guinea (Fig. 1). Described as a loincloth and connected to the collecting activities of Pater Georg Höltker SVD, this object is currently being conserved in the conservation department of the Haute-Ecole Arc (HE-Arc CR) of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. This is an opportunity to have a closer look at the origin, the conservation state and the unfolding of the barkcloth loincloth V.1595 as well as at the relationship between this person and the MEN.

Barkcloth Loincloth V.1595

This loincloth comes from the Korugu tribe located in the East central region of Papua New Guinea (Fig. 3). It is defined by Höltker as: "A (wide) women's loincloth (*ambu dene Kauru*) from bark or phloem. It is worn only in front and on solemn occasions [translation]". The barkcloth is probably made of Koragl tree bark. It is an almost rectangular-shaped object which measures about 20 cm wide by 90 cm long. Beater marks are visible on the surface, but no sign of painted decoration was detected with visible light or under UV light.

It is the only one of this type from the Korugu tribe in the MEN's Höltker collection. Others are smaller but a similar Höltker's loincloth has been identified in the Welt Museum in Vienna (VO 128859).

It shows several alterations be-

cause of its life when in use and after its collection but only two will be mentioned. The loincloth is completely deformed from inappropriate, folded and wrapped storage. The barkcloth lost its flexibility due to dry climates that leached free water from the ma-



Fig. 1: Barkcloth loincloth V.1595. (©N.Moret, MEN, HE-Arc CR, 2018)

terial. Deformations induce tensions on the dried barkcloth material. Tearing or more deformations are possible even by simple handling.

The Unfolding

Next January, it is planned to reshape this object in a humidity chamber. The treatment period will depend on the behavior of the barkcloth material.

The final shape is the main question of the project. Stakeholders' opinions about the result must be discussed step-by-step during the reshaping. Two unfolding solutions are possible. First, the loincloth could be completely flattened. The readability would be maximized because both sides would be accessible, and long-term conservation with no material stress ensured. Secondly, it could be unfolded in two, either with the current middle fold or with a new larger "U" fold. The current fold would keep stress in the object and might affect its conservation but would not create a new mark as the "U" would. Readability would be affected be-

cause one side would be hidden in the fold. Nevertheless, its surface storage would be half the size compared to completely flattened and it could, in a way, suggest its use position (Fig. 2).

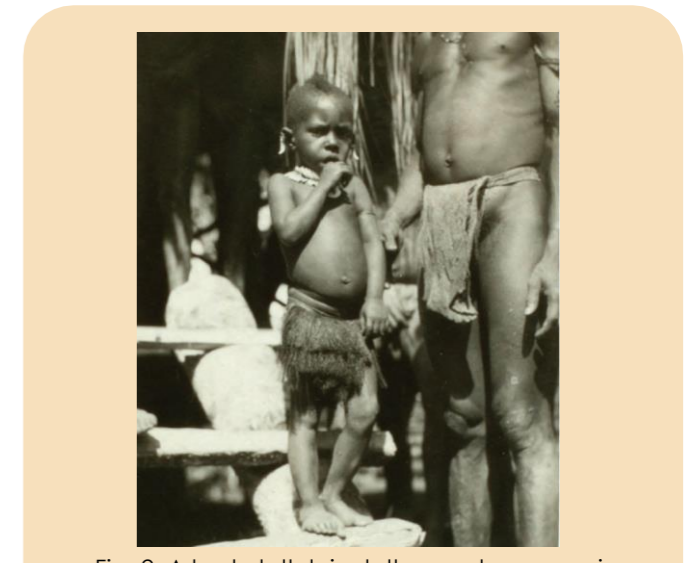


Fig. 2: A barkcloth loincloth worn by a man in the Arapesh area of Papua New Guinea in 1931-1932. (©IATH, R. Fortune, M. Mead)

It was decided to first unfold the loincloth in two, then maybe, depending on the result, to unfold it completely or to transform the current fold into a larger "U".

Georg Höltker and the MEN

Pater Georg Höltker (1895 - 1976) was a German priest, missionary and ethnologist whose lifetime work has recently been reassessed by various authors (Rüegg, 2015 and 2018). After studying theology and philosophy, with a focus on anthropology, he joined the "Societas Verbi Divini" (SVD) religious congregation in 1919. His field work brought him to Papua New Guinea in 1936. Three years later he returned to Fribourg (CH), with more than 2,000 objects, including the said loincloth and 2,500 pictures. From there, he sold

parts of his duplicate objects to different ethnographic institutions (Kokot, 2012).

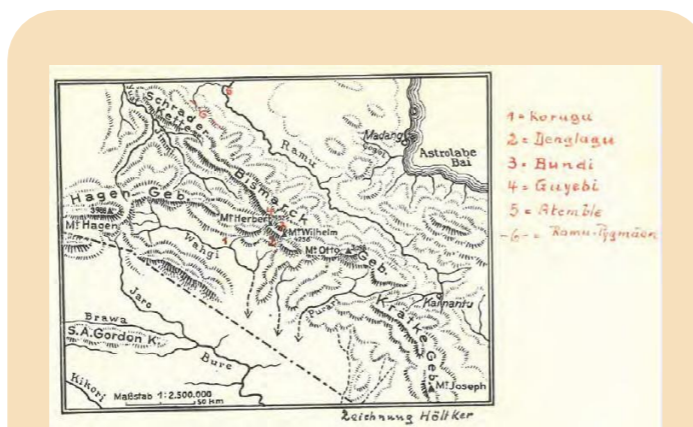


Fig. 3: Höltker's map of tribes location from which his collection come. (©N.Moret, MEN, HE-Arc CR, 2018)

In 1942, Höltker suggested that former MEN's curator Théodore Delachaux (1879 - 1949) purchase part of his collection. Through his interest in anthropology, Höltker knew the expectations of museums. He offered fully documented objects with precise information about their name, their origin, their use, etc.

Currently, Höltker's objects are divided between these institutions:

- Pro Ethnographica in Bulle (CH): about 600 objects,
- Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel (CH): 195 objects,

- Museum der Kulturen in Basel (CH): 289 objects,
- Haus Völker und Kulturen of the Steyler Mission in Sankt Augustin (D): 487 objects,
- Welt Museum in Vienna (A): 130 objects.

There was a collection of Höltker's objects in the former Lateran Museum (I), now divided in several institutions. Some are also conserved in private collections.

Conclusion

As part of the MA conservation program of the HE-Arc, this loincloth represents a first approach to the conservation of organic materials found in ethnographic collections. A more in-depth study of the conservation and restoration of pacific tapa will be explored in a MA thesis in 2020

Acknowledgment

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