MINUTES OF 45TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING HELD ON MONDAY,
22 NOVEMBER, 1971 AT 8.00 P.M.
in the Museum Education Building.

The President, Mr. G.L. Pretty, was in the Chair, and there
were 31 members and 14 visitors present.

1. Apologies

Drs. W.G. Inglis, M.J.W. Sando, Messrs. C.P. Mountford,
R. Edwards, R. Smith and Miss S. Abbott.

2. Publications

Papers and Journals received from other societies were
tabled.

3. Minutes

The Minutes of the Annual General Meeting 1970 were taken
as read and confirmed.

4. Election of new members

The election of the following new members was announced:

. Dr. J.E.S. Hardy, 7 Stewart Ave., Salisbury, S.A.
. Mr. T.L.B. McLeay, 337 Payneham Road, Marden, S.A.

5. Annual Report - Honorary Secretary

The Honorary Secretary, Mr. R.D.J. Weathersbee, read the
following report:-

"On behalf of the Council, I have the honour to present
the 45th report of the Society:

1. Elections

At the Annual General Meeting in 1970, the following
members were elected to office:--

President: Mr. G.L. Pretty
Vice President: Dr. C.J. Ellis
Honorary Secretary: R.D.J. Weathersbee
Honorary Treasurer: Mr. S. Kuusk
Hon. Librarian: Mr. L.F. Barter
NEW LIGHT ON OLD MELANESIA

Graeme Pretty

The latest return to Melanesia stemmed from a research project, now of a few years standing. It is devoted to the analysis of a large group of prehistoric stone pounding implements unearthed in New Guinea over the past sixty years. They are best known from hundreds of finds in the Central Highlands region, itself an area of intense fascination with its vast populations unstudied and unthought of until their accidental discovery in 1933. The "Central Highlanders" have exerted a great attraction to anthropologists, not only from their purity from outside contacts but also their cultural integrity extending across the greater part of the New Guinea cordillera. Their distinctiveness from the peoples of the swampy rivers, coasts and offshore islands have made their study and description the most flourishing department within contemporary Melanesian studies. Hence their origins have been a source of much speculation and crucial to this has been the presence of numerous prehistoric artifacts.

Chief among these have been mortar bowls and finely wrought pestles. They have intriguing aspects. Firstly, many of them are finely sculpted, a trait placing them in marked contrast to contemporary Highland culture with its almost total lack of plastic art of any kind. They are secondly, mystifying to the modern Highlanders who, when they find them, if they do not dread them, carry them away to their culthouses to use them in magical practices. Finally, to the scholar they are problematical, for recent Highlands technology includes no process of pounding or grinding which could satisfactorily explain the large numbers of finds. The most obvious inference is food, Highlanders it is true are avid gardeners, but their staple foods: sweet potatoes, green vegetables and occasional bouts of pig-eating, are prepared by cutting and roasting only. Mortars and pestles therefore, have become a vexed question, and a source of much conjecture.

As I improved my inventory of these objects certain interesting features became evident. Firstly, mortars and pestles were by no means confined to the Highlands. Plotted distributions carried them out of the Highlands, across the north coast and into the Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville. Secondly, the stone heads of clubs, while made and traded extensively in tribal New Guinea, proved to be unknown in the Highlands except at its boundary zone. Stone club heads were however recovered
NEW LIGHT ON OLD MELANESIA (Cont'd.)

Melanesian food plants but it is painfully inadequate to the needs of current research. For example, the complete recent disruption to food plant distributions following on from European control and improved communications has been pretty well ignored, yet it is a fundamental foreground to our understanding of traditional garden systems. If careful studies of another society are made, the observer invariably tends to absorb and share in its presuppositions, and things that are taken for granted tend to escape mention. This might explain the fate of information about food and its preparation in Melanesia. It has only occasionally been recorded even by fieldworkers established in villages over long periods.

Working and reworking the literature left me very intrigued by repeated references to the pounding of forest nuts and taros into doughs or pastes. In brief, the technique involves the separate roasting then mashing of tubers, usually taros (which have a dense texture and are difficult to munch through without preparation), in a bowl with a long pestle, wooden nowadays. The other main constituent is a forest nut, usually the Canarium, which smoked or dried yields a large oil content. This too is pulped and mashed in a deep bowl. The two are then combined also by pulping and mashing, then flavoured. They form an extremely rich and satisfying food, combining fats, protein and starches. Its fulfilment of all the requirements of a food staple are readily apparent.

The distribution of reported instances of these pastes covered the trailing island chain of Melanesia, from the Bismarck Archipelago through the Solomons, the New Hebrides and to Fiji. Further records were reported from the north coast of mainland New Guinea. This distribution coincides with the wooden pestles, plates and bowls I had examined in Museums. The comparison it bore with the prehistoric stone forms and the wide distribution left me with the strong impression that these taro-nut pastes were a more important component of Melanesian culture than was generally appreciated. It also supplied an answer to one of the fundamental problems of Melanesian history which is, given the paucity of faunas to be hunted or plant foods to be foraged in Melanesia, how have men managed to establish themselves in such numbers for such time and so comfortably as to develop the populations and that vivid cultural diversity as presented itself to the incoming Europeans? The distribution and variety of tuber and nut food
pastes seemed to answer this and, in any case, to be overdue for reappraisal. This was the aim of the recent field work.

The funds to do the work came from a Museum Research Fellowship granted by the Wenner-Gren Foundation of New York, for which I am gratefully appreciative. A donation to the South Australian Museum's research fund enabled Tony Crawford (my companion of the 1969 trip to the Southern Highlands) to accompany and assist me. Departing Australia in late February we traced a broad arc taking in Fiji, the New Hebrides, the Solomons, Bougainville, Buka, New Ireland, and New Britain. Crawford's commitments obliged his return at the conclusion of the Solomon's work and the rest of the trip was done solo. From the time of leaving the Solomons the funding was generally made available by the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, Canberra, in return for fieldwork for their ethnic art programme. I returned to Australia in June via Port Moresby.

The stress of the inquiry was on traditional food technology and the localities visited were those known to have yielded food pounders of both prehistoric and contemporary forms. In the New Hebrides we investigated the reports of large shallow stone bowls, many of them decorated, from the Big Bay Area of Northern Santo. From there we went to the Banks Group, in particular to Santa Maria Island, where stone bowls had been reported in association with stone building complexes. We cleared and surveyed one of these, plotting in its stone receptacles. Returning to Santo we flew to the Solomons, establishing ourselves in New Georgia where we studied the manufacture and distribution of stone mortars and the range of pastes they were used for. This enabled us to rule out most of the so-called prehistoric varieties as modern but this proved otherwise when traced across to Bougainville where prehistoric mortars of a distinct type appear in the local myth-history as prototypes to the wooden drums used in men's ceremonies. In Buka a well-developed taro paste economy, having distinctive implements, was taken note of. Further information came from Northern New Ireland and New Britain where taro-nut pastes seem to have been general. They can be traced throughout the length of New Britain to its far Western End, where their presence amongst the Siassi trading communities confirms reports of taro pastes from the adjacent mainland coasts of the Huon Peninsula and north coastal areas.

Moving through the area provided ample evidence for the total alteration to traditional subsistence as a consequence of the European and Asian presence. This applied also to the tuber pastes under review. Coconuts have almost entirely replaced
the Canarium nut as a source of fat and over most of the area
the virtual disappearance of taro due to recently introduced
diseases has seen its replacement by manioc and sweet potato.
The demands of a cash economy, for example copra, and the
decay of interest in traditional subsistence foods or for that
matter of any aspect of traditional life, has diverted
people to plants, for example manioc and sweet potato, that
require a minimum of effort to produce. Cash also buys them
tinned foods and rice which in some places forms the main
food. The nutritional consequences of this are obvious and
I left the area with a profound feeling not only that
Melanesians are less well nourished now than in the old days,
but that the causes of this are a direct outcome of the
complete cultural disintegration suffered by these people
since their pacification. Cultural conservation is generally
seen as an improvement in the quality of life and therefore
attractive though expensive luxury. For Melanesia as I see
it, the restoration of some departments of traditional
culture would seem a fundamental requirement of their
economic and social welfare.

One of the most interesting collaterals of this period in
the field was the investigation of ethnic art in the Bismarck
Archipelago. The major stress of the inquiry was on the
range of forms and distribution of ceremonial art and
provided a most useful index to the cultural geography of
the archipelago and an invaluable experience for classifying
collections of its art. This is being made use of in the
improvement of the collections of Pacific Basin art in
Canberra destined for exhibition in the planned National
Gallery. This allied inquiry into cultural geography, in an
area not well known from this aspect, formed a most
appropriate and satisfying comparative study to the continued
inquiry into its culture history.

The survival of taro pastes on the north coast of the New
Guinea mainland is significant for the support it lends to
the possibility that it formed the subsistence food of the
Central Highlands prior to the hypothesised introduction of
sweet potato. It also clarifies our picture of Melanesian
subsistence economy when we compare it on the one hand, with
the harvested yams plus fish and meat boiled in pots which
flourished along the south eastern Peninsula of New Guinea
and its adjacent island groups, or on the other, with the
pulped sago, fish and meat roasted and boiled which
NEW LIGHT ON OLD MELANESIA (Cont'd.)

characterised the swampy riverine tracts on both coasts of the Western part of the island. The intriguing aspect of this last is the links it suggests with the ancient tribal appearance of Indonesia and Peninsular Asia. It would be over-simplifying the situation to place this on a straight geographical basis, rather we should see pulped sago, boiled and roasting of tubers, and the pounding of tubers and forest nuts into pastes as separate components of Melanesian subsistence, each having a historical and a distributive aspect. Assessing these various food practices from the wider point of view however leaves the tuber and nut pastes as something uniquely Melanesian in origin and character. So then, besides providing a credible explanation for the prehistoric mortars and pestles, the distribution and varieties of tuber and nut pastes promises to significantly reorient our current notions about developments in Melanesian culture history.

The results of this trip are intriguing and may be important. Nevertheless, their fortification must await the careful collation and ordering of data. The scope of the trip was wide and the time spent in the field insufficient to gain anything more than a survey or overview. Nevertheless, nothing less sweeping than an overview at this stage would have been sufficient and the avenues it suggests for future research are pregnant with interesting possibilities.