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THE CHOROTES INDIANS

IN THE
BOLIVIAN CHACO

A PRELIMINARY REPORT

DEDICATED TO
THE XIVTH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICANISTS
AT STUTTGART 1904

BY
ERIC VON ROSEN
STOCKHOLM



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IVAR HÆGGSTRÖMS BOKTRYCKERI A. B.
1904.



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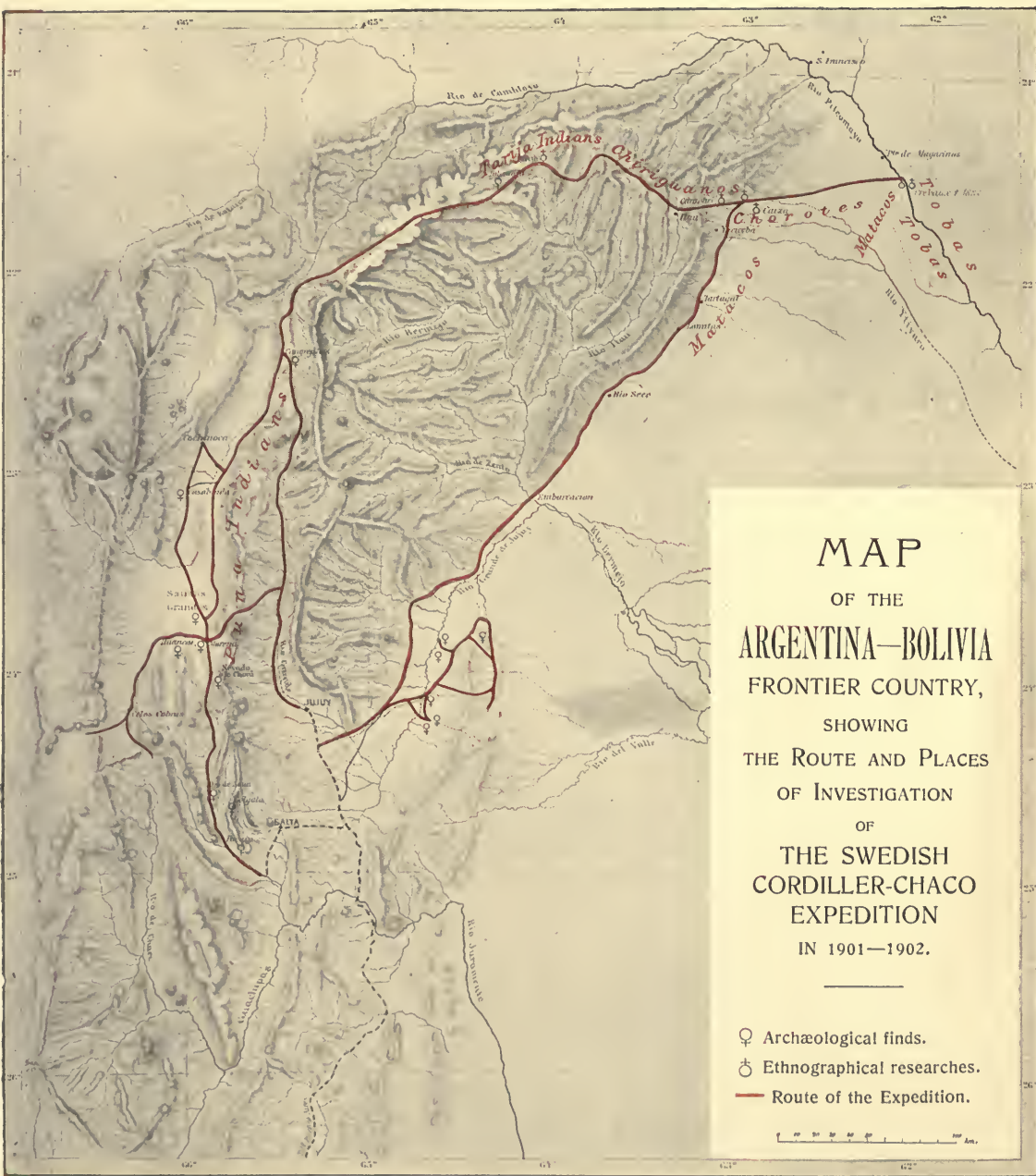
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR.



MAP
OF THE
ARGENTINA—BOLIVIA
FRONTIER COUNTRY,
SHOWING
THE ROUTE AND PLACES
OF INVESTIGATION
OF
THE SWEDISH
CORDILLER-CHACO
EXPEDITION
IN 1901—1902.

- ♀ Archæological finds.
- ♂ Ethnographical researches.
- Route of the Expedition.





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During the Swedish expedition to South America, 1901—1902, under the leadership of Baron Erland Nordenskiöld, I came into contact with some of the Indian tribes who, free and independent, roam about in the forests and deserts of El Gran Chaco, and who are still in possession of the larger portion of this vast region. It is true that both the Bolivian and Argentine Governments attempt, step by step, by founding new settlements and colonies, to add more territory to civilization, but the difficulties which meet new settlers are frequently so great that they are obliged to desert their new homes and return to more hospitable parts. Furthermore, many have succumbed under water-famine, fevers, and attacks from the numerous Indian tribes of the Chaco.

From these tribes, who still constitute the real population of the Chaco, I had an opportunity of making collections from the Chorotes, the Chiriguano, the Tobas, and the Tapietes. From the Mataco Indians Baron Nordenskiöld had made a valuable collection before I joined the expedition. I will now try to give a short description of the first of the aforesaid tribes, namely the Chorotes Indians, who are practically unaffected by any civilization, and are therefore very suitable as a type of a nomad Chaco people.

In the literature concerning the Chaco, there is not much information to be found in regard to the Chorotes. The French traveller, M. Thouar, has, in his work »Explorations dans l'Amérique de Sud», given some stray informa-

tions in regard to this Indian tribe, whom he found on the upper course of the Pilcomayo, but as yet no complete description of the Chorotes has been published, and besides the collection which I succeeded in making, and which is now incorporated into the Swedish Ethnographic Riksmuseum, there are but a few stray objects from this tribe in European museums. Several expeditions have, however, come into contact with these tribes of Indians, and Crevaux was murdered in 1880 by the Chorotes and the Tobas, who made a common attack on him; and Ibarreta became the victim of the Indians in 1900, when he attempted to explore the course of the Pilcomayo River. It has not yet been ascertained, for certain, which tribe committed the latter deed, but it is probable that it was the Toba or the Tapietes tribes. An old Mataco Chief, whom I asked if he knew anything about the fate of Ibarreta, said that Ibarreta, when he reached the point where the Pilcomayo spreads out in great swamps, was taken sick and was for some time cared for by the Tapietes Indians, but that they, when he finally began to be too much trouble for them, murdered him while he was asleep.

The Chorotes are a rather tall people. By measurements I have found the average height of the men to be 170 cm., and that of the women about 152 cm. Of course I have not been able to make a sufficient number of measurements, and therefore these figures must be regarded as only approximate. The shape of the cranium is dolichocephal, and Professor Retzius, who kindly undertook the description of the skeletons and skulls which were collected by the expedition, says that none of the Chorotes craniums show signs of deformation. Both men and women are strongly built, although the chest seems to be sunken and the abdomen rather large (Pl. I, Pl. II, Fig. 1). Older individuals are frequently quite fat. The hair is coarse and jet-black, eyes

dark brown and skin chocolate brown, considerably darker among older individuals than among younger.

Both sexes develop early, and girls (Pl. III & Pl. IV) are considered marriageable at about 13, the boys at about 15 years of age. Polygamy only occurs among the rich; thus the Cazikes have quite a number of wives. Parents seem to cherish great love for their children (Pl. V), who, when they are small, are carried by their mothers in a sling on the back. As a sign that the boy has attained manhood, his ears are pierced, and cylindrical wooden pegs are inserted in the holes. Later on, these are exchanged for larger ones, and still later on for still larger, and therefore the ear-laps of older individuals are frequently distended to enormous dimensions (Pl. VI). The same custom exists, according to Dr. Koch*), among the Lengua Indians, who live on the Rio Paraguay, and who have more similarities to the Chorotes than any other Chaco tribe. This is very remarkable, since they inhabit entirely distinct territories and are separated from each other by nearly the whole Chaco with its different tribes of Indians, but it is largely accounted for by the strong tendency of the Chaco tribes to roam about, and it is probable that the Lenguas and Chorotes have formally been in close touch with each other. It is quite certain that the Chorotes have of late moved in a westerly direction, and I found this tribe much further west than their territory has hitherto been supposed to extend. Besides the aforesaid ear-pegs, tatooing is considered a sign of puberty, and individuals of both sexes are tatooed, but the ear-pegs are exclusively reserved for the men. The tatooing, which is almost entirely done on the face, is of different patterns, and is executed by means of cactus spines,

*) Koch, *Th.* Die Lenguas-Indianer in Paraguay. Globus, LXXVIII, 1900, nrs 14 & 15. — Also: *Hawtrey*. The Lengua Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco. Journ. Anthr. Inst. Gr. Brit. & Ireland. XXXI. 1901. p. 280—299.

or sharp bone-awls. The pigment used is soot. Both men and women are frequently painted. The usual color is red and is prepared from the seeds of *Caesalpinia melanocarpa*. For smearing on the paint, the fin-ray of a Siluroid is frequently used.

The men go almost naked (Pl. VII). A fringed leather belt or a woolen cloth worn round the loins is the usual dress (Pl. VIII & Pl. IX). In colder weather, however, they wrap themselves up in large woolen mantles, frequently with interwoven stripes of different colors. The women wear a light, usually blue cloth, open along one side, and held together at the shoulder with a cactus spine. Young boys and girls always go naked. Although the Chorotes have no great fancy for clothes, which is easily explained by the fact that they live in an extremely warm and dry climate, they are all the more fond of ornaments of all possible kinds; and I do not believe that any Chaco tribe can compete with them in this respect. But contrary to what is the case in Europe, among the Chorotes it seems that only the men are victims of the fancy for ornaments. If an ornament is found on any member of the fair sex, it is of the simplest nature, but I must, alas, admit that this token of the simplicity of the Chorotes women has its origin in the rather egoistical disposition of the men, which prevents them from giving away any ornament which can enhance their own appearance. Among the ornaments used I may mention the frontal bands, of bird-skin or wool, under which ostrich plumes or other feathers are inserted. These plumes or feathers are frequently cut in different patterns (Pl. II, Fig. 2). It was, however, impossible for me to ascertain whether the different modes of cutting the feathers had any symbolic meaning or not. Furthermore, network-caps and hoods, frequently studded with carved pieces of shell, necklaces, all the way up to 15 meters long, consisting of strung discs of mollusk

shell, necklaces with spangles of mother-of-pearl taken from river mussels, bracelets and anklets of leather or down, and finger rings made of lizard skin. These rings are made in an original manner. A slice about 2 mm. thick is cut out of the lizard's tail at the point where it is of the same thickness as the finger which is to bear the ring. After the flesh has been poked out of the slice, the ring is ready.

As regard cleanliness, the Chorotes are nowhere near as filthy as their neighbors the Matacos (Pl. X), but the frequent scarcity of water in the Chaco causes the cleanliness of the Chorotes to be in direct proportion to the existing water supply. They devote special care to the hair, but have evidently much difficulty in keeping it free from vermin, notwithstanding that they diligently comb it with toothed fish-jaws (Pl. XI, Fig. 1), which have to act as a substitute for fine-combs. Combs of wood (Pl. XVIII, Fig. 1) and bamboo-splints also occur. The beardgrowth is very slight, and all hairs on the lips, chin, and other parts of the body are carefully pulled out. The women wear the hair hanging loose. This is also generally the case with the men, who, however, frequently use to bring the hair together in the back of the neck, and wind it tight, to a length of about 20 cm., so that it forms a kind of pigtail. It is also a very common custom to insert a lock of a conquered enemy's hair, wound into a pigtail (Pl. XVIII, Fig. 2), under the frontal band.

The Chorotes live together in villages, and every village has its chieftain, but this chieftain is subordinate to a tribe-chieftain in common for all the villages. Chieftainship is hereditary, and the chieftains seem to be highly esteemed and to be vested with extensive authority. Thus, for instance, it is only necessary to get the consent of the chieftain in order to have the members of the tribe execute any work desired. As the Chorotes are a nomad-tribe, their

huts are of very simple nature. A few tree-branches about 3 meters long are stuck in the earth, with the thick end downward, so that they enclose a circle of about 2 meters' diameter. The tops of the branches are then tied together, so that a bee-hive shaped frame is made (Pl. XI, Fig. 2), and when this framework is covered with palm-leaves and grass, the hut is finished (Pl. VII). The opening of the hut is made so large that a person can pass through it in a crouching position. The huts are frequently built so near each other that they can be united by means of a very short, covered passage, and several huts are sometimes thus connected. The Chiriguanos, who are residentiary, have much finer huts, both as regards size and construction, and for the sake of comparison I will show a few pictures of them (Pl. XII, Fig. 1 & 2).

In the Chorotes huts we do not find many household utensils, a few bowls of gourd-rinds (Pl. XVIII, Fig. 8), mortars of palm-wood with pestles of the bone-hard wood of *Bulnesia Sarmienti*, mussel-shells used as spoons, and a few roughly made vessels of burnt clay, are all that we find. The clay vessels lack ornaments and cannot be compared with the fine pottery of the Chiriguanos. For transporting the household utensils in moving, which is one of the duties of the women, large, network bags are used, which are made of fibres from the Chaguar plant (*Bromelia Serra*), which is very common in the Chaco. Small bags of the same material are generally carried by the men, who keep in them diverse small articles, such as tobacco-pipes and utensils for producing fire by friction. The fire-utensils of the Chorotes consist of two sticks (Pl. XVIII, Fig. 3 & 4), of different length, taken from a certain species of liana, of the Asclepiadaceæ. When fire is wanted, the smaller stick (Fig. 4), which is generally only about 5 cm. long, is inserted in the end of an arrow-shaft, after which the other

stick (Fig. 3), generally about three times as long, in which there are several small concavities (and as is usual in South America, always with a notch at one side), is pressed firmly against the ground with the left foot. The first-mentioned stick is now placed upright in one of the small concavities, after which the arrow-shaft is dexterously twirled between the hands (Pl. XIII). The fine dust formed and caused to glow by the friction of the two sticks is collected in the lateral notch and serves as tinder. Dry grass is laid on the glowing tinder-dust and is blown into a flame. In this way the Chorotes make fire in about 30 seconds.

The Chorotes live by hunting and fishing and by collecting esculent roots and fruits found in the woods. The fruit of the aforesaid Chaguar plant (*Bromelia Serra*) is an especially important article of food with these Indians. I do not believe that the Chorotes can brew any intoxicating drink, but their neighbors, the Chiriguanos are experts in making the alcoholic drink, *chicha* (Pl. XIV). The only article of gratification used by the Chorotes is doubtless tobacco, which is smoked in straight reeds or cylindrical, wooden, tubes, resembling cigar-holders (Pl. XVIII, Fig. 5). Fish can only be caught in the larger water-courses, as for instance Rio Pilcomayo (Pl. XV, Fig. 1), since in the Chaco all small water-courses dry up in the dry season. The fishing-tackle used is generally nets made of chaguar yarn. Fishing is also done with hook and line, although more seldom. Since the Chorotes do not use either boats or canoes, they are obliged either to wade or swim when they set their nets, and in so doing they expose themselves to being badly torn or mutilated by a fish with sharp teeth which infests the larger rivers of the Chaco. This fish (a *Serrosalmo*, called by the settlers »palometre»), frequently bites round pieces of flesh from the bodies of the Indians, and many Indians carried large scars after such bites (Pl.

VI). On the other hand, the species of alligator, *Caiman sclerops* (Pl. XV, Fig. 2), which is most frequent in the Chaco, seldom attacks human beings.

In the hunt, the bow and arrow are used exclusively (Pl. XVI). The bow, which has a length of about 17 decimeters, is made of a very hard kind of wood, and is furnished with a string of twisted hide. The arrows are long and frequently lack feather guides. If there are any, they are only two, short and wide, and each consisting of half a feather placed on edge. The heads are of wood or iron; in the former case they are made of some very hard kind of wood, and frequently provided with barbs. In hunting smaller mammals and birds, arrows are used with blunt, club-shaped heads of wood, which prevent injuring the skin of the game, and besides, such arrows will not stick in the trunks or branches of trees and thus be lost. Poisoned arrows are not used.

The bow and arrow are the most important weapons, and in order to protect themselves from arrows, the Chorotes, when on the war-path, wear a kind of shirt of mail made of Chaguar-fibre. These shirts are quite heavy, and are very closely woven, or braided, and prevent arrows from entering the body. Similar shirts, although of much thinner quality, are in use among several Chaco tribes, but are worn exclusively as a protection against the cold. It is quite common among all Chaco tribes to shoot fire into the villages of the enemy by means of burning arrows. Near a sugar plantation which we passed, two Indian tribes had become enemies and shot at each others villages all night with burning arrows. Our expedition arrived at the plantation the next day, and thus we missed a very fine spectacle. In hand to hand combats, the Chorotes use short clubs (Fig. 1) of a heavy kind of wood, which they know how to handle with great skill. The Chorotes can, ho-

wever, hardly be called brave, since they try to avoid fighting enemies of equal strength. If, however, they are so numerous that there is no doubt of victory, their warrior spirit is aroused, but they always try first to lull the enemy into security, so as to surprise him and win an easy victory. Thus the Chorotes and Toba tribes had in the most friendly and peaceful manner carried on barter with the Crevaux expedition, until, at a preconcerted sign, they took out their clubs and began the massacre, which ended in the annihilation of the expedition.

All heavy work is done by the women, while the men pass the time with hunting and fishing or with playing. A common game consists in throwing four rectangular wooden chips on the ground. The chips are flat on one side and convex on the other (Pl. XVII, Fig. 6 & 7), and the value of the throw depends on how many chips lie with the convex side upwards. The scores are kept by sticking arrows in the ground (Pl. XVII, Fig. 1.) Quite a large number of men take part in the game at once. A hockeylike play (Pl. XVII, Fig. 2) is also very common. The clubs, or bats, are bent palm-leaf stalks and the balls are cut out of palm-wood. The stakes are generally necklaces of discs of mollusk shell. In Chaco these necklaces are the usual legal tender, and serve as a kind of unit of value among the Chorotes.

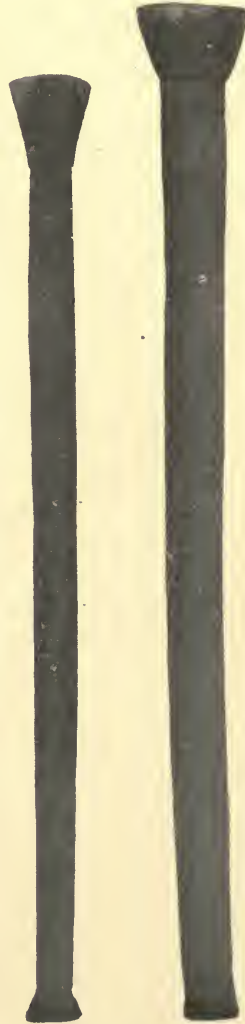


Fig. 1.

The musical talent is not highly developed among the Chorotes. Their musical instruments, with the exception of a kind of magic drum, consist only of flutes of bone and wood. On these they can produce four or five different notes, but I was never able to distinguish any particular melody. A kind of disc-shaped whistles of wood are carried as ornament on the breast, and with them they can make very shrill, far-sounding notes.

The Chorotes believe in spirits, both good and bad, but the good spirits, who are considered to be harmless, receive very little attention, while great respect is shown to the evil spirits, since they are believed to cause sickness and other misfortunes, and in order to scare away these troublesome spirits, magic dances are arranged. The men of the tribe assemble by night around a fire in the village and dance to a monotonous song. In order to frighten the spirits, they make as much noise as possible with rattles and magic drums. The rattles are made of gourd-rinds, frequently carved with ornaments, in which are placed stones, pieces of metal, and seeds. In nearly all rattles examined by me I have found these three articles, which are probably supposed to have some magic influence. The magic drums consist of an earthen pot covered with skin, and the pot is generally partly filled with water to give the desired tone to the drum.

When a member of the tribe dies, he is buried in a grave near the village, usually in a sitting posture, and it is customary to place beside him a bowl of water and a bowl of food, so that he will not lack viaticum. After the burial death-dances are performed to protect the deceased from evil spirits. All this goes to prove that the Chorotes believe in a life after this.

Their neighbors, the Chiriguanos, whose customs have been described by several explorers, believe that the soul

after death goes to the Kingdom of the Great Spirit, Tumpá, where he is allowed to enjoy all worldly pleasures, only in a magnified degree. But no joy lasts for ever. When the spirit has lived for some time with Tumpá, he is obliged to return to the earth and wander about in the shape of a fox. When the fox dies, the spirit is transferred to a rat, and when the rat at last also dies, the spirit takes possession of a branch of an old tree in the forest. The tree at last falls from old age, and as the branch slowly decays, the spirit simultaneously loses consciousness, and is for ever dead. It is possible that the Chorotes have a similar conception of the life to come.

The language of the Chorotes seems to differ essentially from that of the surrounding Indian tribes. I will here give a few examples.

	<i>Chorotes.</i>	<i>Matacos.</i>	<i>Tobas.</i>
<i>Sun</i>	Kileh	Ichuala	Tahigua.
<i>Fire</i>	Hoát.	Eitach	Dólle
<i>Ear</i>	Sitóte	Untjaté	Kanéktelá
<i>Nose</i>	Sitnethué	Enhnus	Kadimick

The Chiriguanos and Tapietes speak Guaraní, and most of the Chaco tribes are able to speak a little of this language, which in the Chaco plays the rôle of a kind of diplomatic language.

In contrast to the Matacos, the Chorotes did not appear to be any lethargic or degenerated race. The contrary, indeed! I had the opportunity of observing them during their housework, on their hunts, while playing games, and they always seemed wide-awake and interested.

As to their future, it is not probable that they will form any important constituent part of the population of the country when civilization once gets a firm foothold in this part of Chaco. It is true that Indian-hunters have

succeeded in bringing Chorotes Indians to the sugar plantations to cut sugar-cane or to serve the white men in some other manner, but it has then happened that this tribe, like so many other aborigines, only adopt the bad qualities of the white men, and it is almost certain that, through the effects of alcohol and contagious diseases, they gradually will become extinct.



Chorotes Indian.



1.



2.

1. Chorotes men and women. — 2. Chorotes Indians with ornaments.



Chorotes girls.



Chorotes girl.



Chorotes mother with child.



Chorotes Indian with scar on upper arm from bite of a »palometre« fish.



Chorotes Indian in front of his hut.



Chorotes Indian with mantle about his hips.



Chorotes boy and girl.



Mataco Indian.



1.



2.

1. Chorotes woman combing her husband. — 2. Chorotes hutframes.



1.



2.

1, 2. Chiriguano huts.



Chorotes Indian making fire by friction.



Chiriguano Indians in front of their hut. In foreground a frame with pellets of chewed maize being dried for preparation of chicha.



1.



2.

1. Rio Pilcomayo. — 2. Alligator. (*Caiman sclerops*).



Chorotes Indian shooting with bow and arrow.



1.



2.

1. Chorotes Indians playing a game, marking scores with arrows.
2. Chorotes boys playing a kind of hockey.



1.



2.



3.



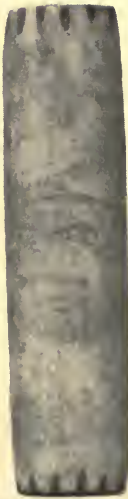
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5.



6.



7.



8.

1. Wooden comb. - ($\frac{2}{3}$) — 2. Enemy's hairlock, a trophy, used as an ornament. - ($\frac{2}{3}$) — 3 o. 4. Fire utensils. - ($\frac{2}{3}$). — 5. Tobacco pipe. - ($\frac{2}{3}$). — 6 o. 7. Wooden chips used in a game. - ($\frac{2}{3}$). — 8. Calabash bowl. - ($\frac{1}{2}$).

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