

BYWAYS IN OXFORD ANTHROPOLOGY

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

A New Exhibition at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

'A *what* exhibition?' people exclaim, evidently unwilling to believe their ears. 'Oh, a *hat* exhibition', they repeat in amazement, and as the polite smiles slip from their faces we watch the thought balloons emerge from behind their anxious eyes.

A hat exhibition? At the Pitt Rivers Museum? A mere fashion show at one of the oldest and most renowned ethnographic museums in the world? Surely something so frivolous is not 'in keeping' or 'relevant', not suitably serious or scholarly?

This reaction is precisely why an exhibition of hats and headgear *is* relevant in an ethnographic museum, for it betrays an attitude to headgear: that in late twentieth-century Britain hats are associated with pleasure and frivolity, weddings and the races. (And what of all those other hats - warm woolly balaclavas, waterproof hats, safety helmets?) In fact, at all times, in all parts of the world, hats have been loaded with meaning; they are therefore worthy of serious consideration.

The aim of the Pitt Rivers Museum exhibition 'On Top of the World' - a title which admittedly betrays a certain *joie de vivre* - is to look at headgear around the world, its different uses, its aesthetic appeal and the significance attached to it. In such an exhibition, General Pitt Rivers' belief in the value of comparative display comes into its own, even though the primary theme is not, as he would have wished, evolution. Broadly speaking, people wear hats for largely the same reasons, and the exhibition shows a fascinating array of different solutions to common problems. Thus it has been divided up, loosely, according to function. There are hats for war, for special occasions, hats to denote status, be it social, political or religious, everyday hats and of course those where function is paramount, giving protection from the sun, wind, rain, or even one's taboo relatives. And, as a concession to twentieth-century Western attitudes, there is even a small fashion section, with all that fashion implies! Of course, it soon becomes apparent that one hat can have many functions. For example, the

Northwest Coast chief's head-dress denotes status but is only worn on special occasions, and the Mongolian Yellow Lama's hat indicates not only his religious occupation but his social and scholarly status. The Welsh 'chimney hat', although worn every day, has political implications, for it was strongly linked with the folklore revival movement and the upsurge in nationalist feeling in the nineteenth century. With some headgear, aesthetic considerations are uppermost: for example, Lisu girls in Burma decorate their standard black turbans with brightly coloured strings on special occasions - the list could go on almost endlessly.

The exhibition includes a number of British, and even Oxfordshire items, for we do not subscribe to the ethnocentric view that equates 'ethnographic' with 'exotic'. British hats are, more often than not, fulfilling the same functions and conveying similar messages as hats in any other culture. Hence the exhibition includes a policeman's helmet (protection, authority and status) and a nineteenth-century bridesmaid's hat (status on a ceremonial occasion) which have as much anthropological value as, for instance, the Chinese mandarin's hat or the Haida twisted spruce root hat displayed nearby.

We felt it would not have been ethnographically relevant to categorize the hats according to material or technique of manufacture: nevertheless, there is ample opportunity for the visitor to examine these aspects of the specimens. The exhibition includes hats made of textile, fur, wood, grass, metal, leaves, fish skin, basketry and feathers. The decorative techniques employed, such as fine embroidery from China and the Sudan, beadwork from Nigeria and Sarawak, intricate canework from Assam, and painted palmleaf from Borneo, point not only to the technical attention lavished on hats, but also towards aesthetic preferences. The form and decoration of hats also indicate changes and influences brought about by trade, conquest or colonization introducing new materials and techniques. For example, the Azande man's brimmed hat is an amalgam of traditional forms and the influences of both neighbouring groups and Europeans; the Andean knitted cap represents a technique introduced with the Spanish Conquest; and European forms have been assimilated into an *oba's* regalia in Nigeria. Exotic and traded materials often confer status on a hat and its wearer, for example, the trade mirrors incorporated into the Samoan human hair head-dress, *tuinga lauula*, in the nineteenth century.

Working on such an exhibition has had its problems. To start with, how does one define a hat? When does a hat become a mask, and vice versa? Is it a question of structure or function? And so on. Inevitably, some arbitrary distinctions have to be made for purely practical reasons. One might imagine the research for such an exhibition to be a fairly straightforward exercise, but in fact it has proved particularly difficult. Where a given object or photograph has come to the Museum with full and reliable documentation there has been little problem. Sadly, this is not always the case, and some material has no more documentation than, for example, 'Hat, Burma, collected 1893'. Is it traditional or imported? Worn by men or women? When? Has it any special significance? Sometimes a similar object held in the collection will

throw some light on the problem, but it is surprisingly difficult to answer such questions. The written records of anthropologists and travellers are peculiarly unforthcoming on the subject. Although they might give a fairly detailed description of clothing and ornament, the last sentence will read 'Both men and women usually wear hats' - *what* hats? Given the importance of heads and their coverings, both practically and symbolically, in many cultures, this is indeed a curious omission from the record.

Arguably it is wrong to isolate hats and headgear from their related clothing, and there is an attempt to draw attention to this aspect by the use of over 70 photographs showing hats and headgear in context. However, by concentrating on one specific aspect of dress, it has been possible to bring together a much wider range of material (almost 100 items) which does, in the manner in which it is presented, form a coherent whole.

Having worked on this exhibition, we are unlikely ever to feel quite the same about hats. Any hatted individual crossing our path in future will be fair game for scrutiny and analysis. Why is he wearing that? Does it keep his ears warm? Does it keep the sun off? Is he bald? Is he expecting someone to hit him on the head? Does it show his position in society? Should I make way for him? Is he going somewhere special, or does he always wear it? Possibly he just thinks it suits him. Or her.

The result of our labours is, we hope, illuminating, visually exciting and, dare we say it, just a little bit of fun. There is definitely more to hats than meets the eye.

ON TOP OF THE WORLD can be seen at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, throughout 1986.

ELIZABETH EDWARDS
and LINDA CHEETHAM
(Illustrations by
HELEN BOND)



CANADA - QUEEN CHARLOTTE ISLANDS - HAIDA INDIANS
Head-dress worn for the *Klasi la* ceremony



EAST MONGOLIA - NEAR CHAO YANG
Hat of a Buddhist monk of the Yellow Hat Sect



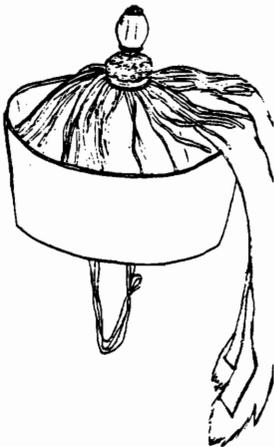
WALES
Black plush 'chimney hat'



ENGLAND
Bridesmaid's hat of pink tulle



NORTH AMERICA - NORTH WEST COAST - HAIDA INDIANS
Hat of twisted spruce root



CHINA - MANCHURIA - MUKDEN
Hat of third-class mandarin



BOLIVIA - AYMARA INDIANS
Knitted woollen cap of the high Andes