

A Welcoming Group of Ongies on Little Andaman Island

NATIVES OF THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS

A Pygmy People Who Lead an Isolated and Idyllic Existence
in Their Island Homes in the Bay of Bengal

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AGES ago, when the maritime people of India first came into contact with the Andaman Islands, they called the local aborigines by a Sanscrit name that meant "monkey people." From this name the present word Andaman was derived. So few are the early records of these islands that we can only suppose that this archipelago was rarely visited by seamen. For centuries, since prehistoric times, in fact, these islands have remained out of contact with the general march of South Asiatic civilization. So bitterly did their population resent the intrusion of foreigners that, today, they remain literally as primitive as they ever have been.

Racially, the Andamanese belong to the negroid race and can be classed as true pygmies. Formerly, anthropologists believed that all negroid races once upon a time migrated from Africa. Today, although this theory is not entirely disproved, it is believed there once existed a negroid people well distributed in southeastern Asia and indigenous to the country. To this race, now nearly extinct, the Andamanese must have belonged. Probably they inhabited the southern

part of the great Indian peninsula in a pre-Druidian period. With the advent of the latter people they may have been largely exterminated, and some of their survivors found their way south by sea to their present isolated abode.

As pygmies, the Andamanese may be compared to very small similar peoples living in Malay, the Phillipines, and the Belgian Congo. Since characteristics of all races are indubitably due to their environment and possibly food, one could ascribe these same elements as the cause of the very short statures of all pygmies. The Andamanese are living in an age previous to that of agriculture and metals. It is true that nowadays they have some metals, but these have filtered to them from the present colony formed by the British at Port Blair. Except for this source, they would have no metals at all. So primitive is the life of the Andamanese, so little have they of what we understand as worldly goods, that it is really surprising how well they get along. They are of two types—those living along the shore and truly amphibian, and those living in the midst of the dense tropical jungle of the interior.



PYGMIES OF LITTLE ANDAMAN

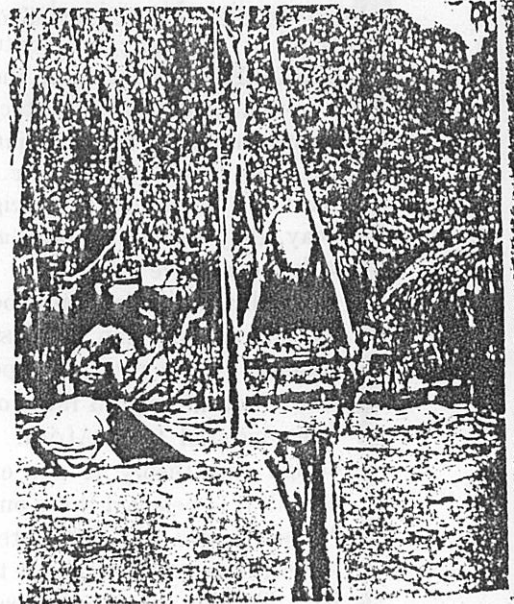
Mr. Glasson, the government forest officer standing with the group, is 5 feet 10 inches tall

The coastal people are, in part, fairly friendly to visitors, but those in the interior, the Jarawa tribes, are fiercely hostile. Early records all show that the enmity to strangers of all Andamanese was unsurpassed. This must have been due to the fact that natives from the mainland, while stopping at the islands, often carried off some of their numbers to be sold elsewhere as slaves. Up to the present all attempts to make friends with the interior tribes have failed. Frequently they made raids on the settlement with the primary object of collecting metal. Today, however, these raids are few, due to the efficient reprisals against them by Government punitive expeditions.

Let us consider the lives of those natives that make their home along the littoral of the North and Central Andamans. Their food supply, which is abundant, is composed of fish and roots, the latter dug up in the jungle, and the fruit of the screw palm. A small part of the jungle right beside the shore is cleared, and tiny thatched houses, hardly more

than lean-tos, are set up in a semicircle. These villages are only of a temporary nature as the natives are forever moving from one place to another. After one site has been inhabited for a certain length of time, the common village smell becomes so offensive that a general exodus takes place to another likely spot. As there is no overcrowding of population, there is ample room in the islands for everyone. Likely sites for villages are easily found, as practically all the littoral is bordered with a clean, sandy beach.

The clothes of the Andamanese are very meager and easy to make from the natural resources of the jungle. Any ornaments they may have, such as beads, have filtered like metal from the settlement at Port Blair. Domestic articles are few—merely wooden receptacles for holding water, and a species of basket work. Knives of all sorts are made from the fine hardwood trees in the jungle and can be used for everything from making their dugout canoes to shaving the hair in the



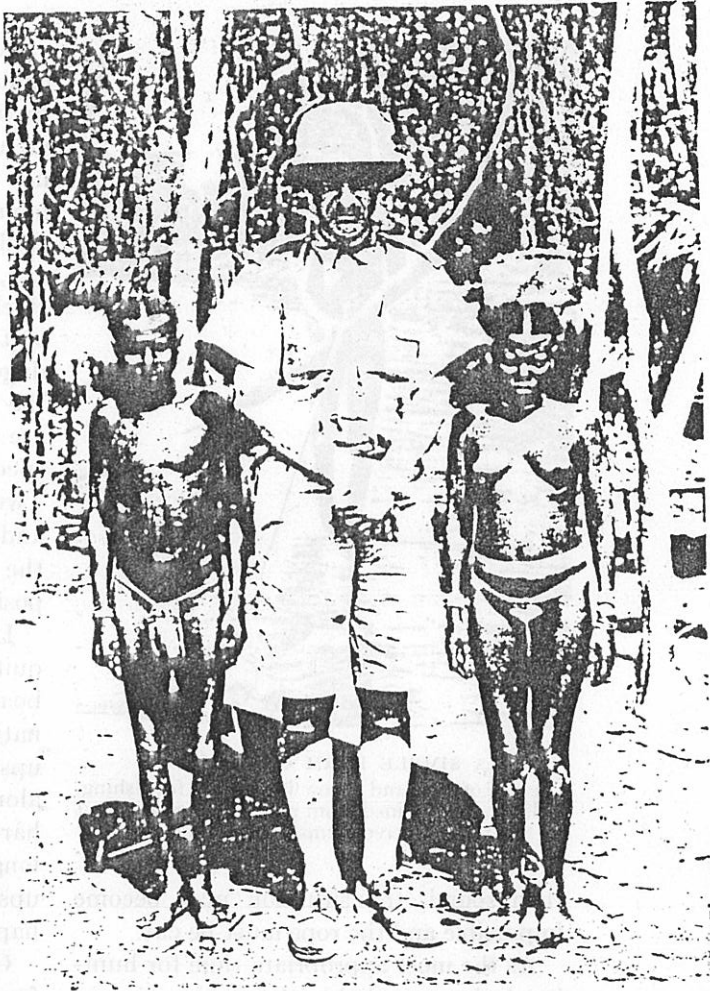
ANDAMAN HOMES

Tiny thatched houses, set up in a semicircle in a clearing beside the shore, form the shelters of these small peoples

center of their heads to form a broad part. The main efforts at industry are in the making of articles to obtain food.

As stated before, these people are quite amphibious. Travel by water is done entirely in small dugout canoes with a light outrigger. They are astonishingly expert in the handling of these boats and can paddle and maneuver them with ease at high speed. From these dugouts, hunting by spearing of turtle and dugong (a manatee running in length from eight to nine feet) is continually practised. The spear, about fifteen feet long, is tipped with a removable barbed point. This latter is attached to the end of a line. When the barb has entered the body of the quarry, the spear shaft comes loose and can be retrieved as it is floating on the water.

When hunting dugong, the spearman often has to hurl his spear a considerable distance. In such an instance he will himself leap out of the canoe as he makes his throw. From the moment he hits the water his movements must be fearfully rapid. At the sting of the sharp point which penetrates deep through the soft skin of the dugong, the latter starts off in the water at full speed. Carefully has the spearman seen to it that there is ample slack to his rope for, as this is rapidly being taken up, he must retrieve his spear-shaft from the water and climb back into the bow of the dugout. Hardly has he



MR. CUTTING WITH TWO ANDAMANESE NATIVES

The scant clothing of the Andamanese people is only such as can easily be made from the natural resources of the jungle

gotten back than off they all go, dragged by the dugong. The dugout's crew is comprised of two or three men, and wonderfully do they preserve the equilibrium of the frail craft during the dugong's rushes. The latter are strong, fast swimmers, and considerable time may elapse before the strain of the pull will wear them down. Like turtles, they are hunted in shallow water, about five or six feet deep, as they are both bottom feeders off the coral. Sometimes the dugong in his rush may make for the open sea and reach deep water. Should he



A SIMPLE FORM OF FISHING

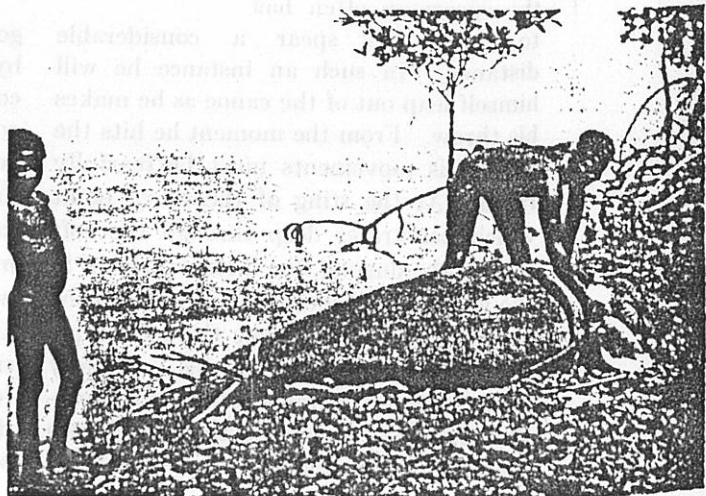
The use of bow and arrow is popular for fishing, and boys are trained from an early age to shoot with diminutive forms of these weapons

then sound, the situation may become impossible and the rope must be cut.

As the most appropriate time for hunting is by moonlight, the dugong is not killed immediately after his capture. The animal is brought to the shore and there kept fast by ropes till the next morning when he is killed and eaten. From our standard of sport, this moonlight hunting in a dugout would certainly come into the classification of a major one.

A PRIZE CATCH

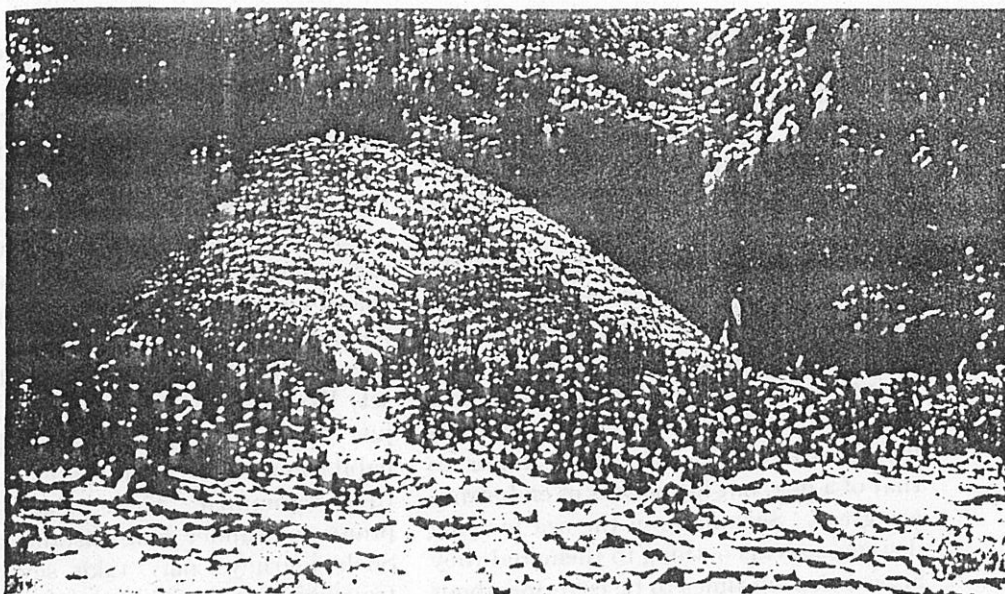
Dugong flesh provides a staple article of diet for the Andaman natives. The dugong is usually hunted by moonlight and dragged to the beach where, the following morning, it is killed and eaten



Turtle hunting, also best done by moonlight, is very much easier. To begin with, there are many more turtles and as they are usually speared at close range they do not necessitate a leap into the sea at the moment of spearing. It certainly does credit to these Andamanese that they can, with so little difficulty, penetrate the thick hard shell of a forty-to-fifty-pound turtle. After being speared, like the dugong, they will start right out pulling the dugout through the water, but they are very different animals, with much less speed and strength, and they soon tire. Two or three rushes are about their limit and then they are hauled up the side of the dugout by their forelegs and deposited in its bottom.

Light as the outriggers are, they add quite considerably to the stability of the boats and then, also, the balance of the natives seems perfect and they never upset. They did not much want a guest along when out hunting and they were hardly to be blamed as, one night when a long spear throw was made, we very nearly upset—a thing which would never have happened had they been alone.

Of course the aftermath of all this is a feast the next day. The dugong is just skinned out and the meat cut off, cooked, and eaten. As the animal is large, there is



A COMMUNAL HUT

This large, thatched dwelling, inhabited by the Ongies of Little Andaman Island, is set near the shore just within the edge of the jungle

apt to be a surplus of meat after the meal is over, but there is no saving made for the future. They have no salt to preserve the meat nor do they cut it into strips and sun-dry it. So easily is sea food procured that they do not consider any laying up for the morrow. When a man is hungry he goes out and catches the food for his immediate use and that is all. The meat of the turtle is cooked in its own shell and then eaten right out of it. In its case, however, differing from the dugong, the entrails are the choicest tidbits of the whole animal. Their preparation is elaborate, and they are most carefully cleaned and washed before being cooked. Maybe, after such a feast a dance takes place. It is a somewhat simple affair, the natives merely jumping up and down and swinging branches of evergreens in their hands.

The other and simpler form of fishing is with bow and arrows. When watching the accuracy of these bowmen, one would immediately assume they had reached the acme of perfection in this art. Boys are

trained from an early age to shoot with diminutive bows and arrows. First they practise on still targets and later on moving ones. Pieces of wood are rolled along the ground and they shoot at these while they are still in motion. The proper full-sized arrows are barbed, usually in two places, with the bones from pigeons' wings. These form a dreadful weapon against human beings and so great is their velocity at close ranges that they can be driven clean through the body. The proper place for shooting fish is along the edge of the reefs which can be reached by dugouts, or along the shore line where the water is shallow enough to wade in. The sea water, as so often happens in the tropics, is very clear, and with true eagles' eyes the natives easily detect their prey when near the surface. With perfect precision they gauge their aim. As is well known, due to light being refracted when passing through water, an object when seen under water appears to be in a different place to that in which it actually is. This fact is well known to the Andamanese

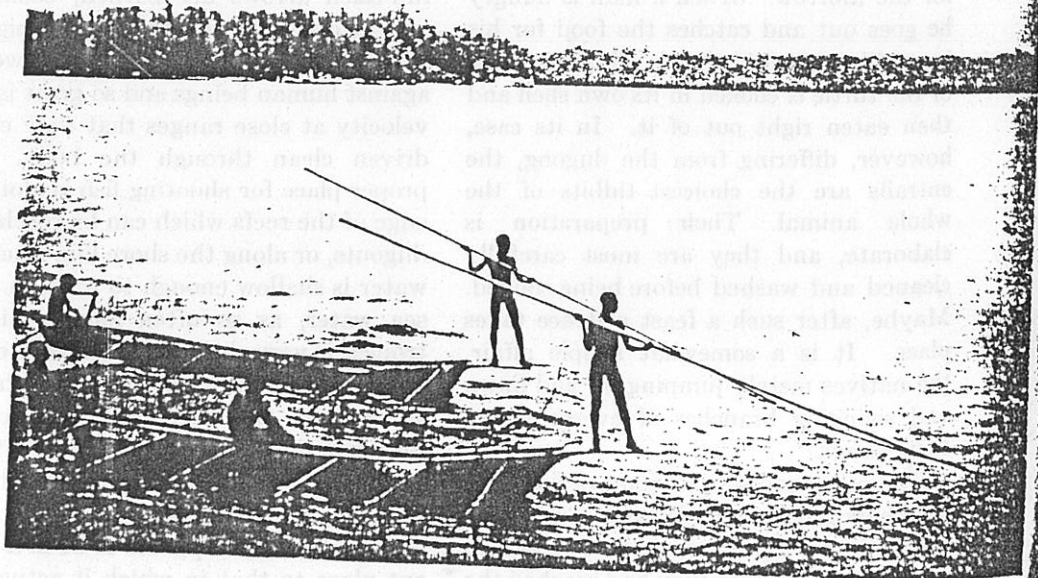
and the proper correction is given when sighting their arrow. For seeing things below the surface, their eyesight is truly marvelous. Sitting on their dugouts quite close to the water, they can see a turtle when swimming near the surface one hundred yards away.

Spending so much of their time on the water, they are fine swimmers and divers. From an early age the children play in the water, swimming about as much under the surface as on it. The average native has probably not much swimming speed, as his usual stroke is somewhat similar to that of a dog, but his powers of endurance are great. Swimming in the sea for long distances seems nothing to them and they appear at such times to be covering about half the distance under the water. They are excellent divers and, when at it, their heads just pop up at the surface for barely time to breathe and they are down again. The water is alive with sharks and at places along the shore there lives a very dangerous species of amphibious

cobra. Neither of these have terrors for the Andamanese. Without fear they will plunge into deep, shark-ridden water and, when after turtles, they will swim about rocks in the sea alive with sharks and yet they never have casualties.

Another branch of this same pygmy race are the Ongies of Little Andaman, an island lying just south of the three major members of the archipelago. These people have permanent habitations set, like the Andamanese, by the shore just within the edge of the jungle. This habitation is one large thatched hut entirely communal. These people are quite prone to wander long distances at sea. Such journeys may take several days traveling, but they do not spend the night at sea, usually stopping at some island en route.

In culture the Ongies are in every way just as primitive as the Andamanese. Their food is likewise composed of fish, roots, and screw palm. Although the particular groups visited were known to



HUNTING IN DUGOUT CANOES

In hunting turtle and dugong for food, spears about fifteen feet long are used. The spears are tipped with a removable barbed point

be friendly, we exercised care on first landing among them to note that those who had appeared out of the jungle on to the beach had no weapons. Any show of these would have been a distinct sign of hostility and landing at the time would not have been safe. Fortunately, due to the fact that they knew Mr. M. C. Bonington of Port Blair, we were received cordially. We visited two different parties of Ongies living at a distance of about ten miles from each other and their welcomes to us were very cordial. At the time, neither of these parties was living in its communal house, but had built for themselves temporary quarters. As it was during the dry season, no covering of any kind had been put up. The jungle had merely been partially cleared and their beds erected. These latter were made of small boughs set up about four inches from the ground. On these they sat or lay all the time they were in camp. As the boughs were not quite even, they must have been frightfully uncomfortable, but no Ongie will ever lie on the ground.

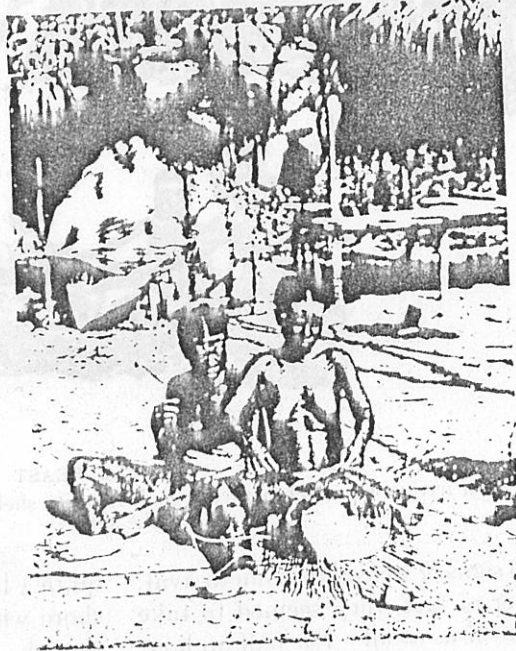
One of the parties we visited had a temporary camp about a mile inland where they were in the process of making a dugout. Like the Andamanese, they hew out solid hardwood trees, but their finished product is a great deal larger. They are not quite as amphibious as the former and do not spend so much time on or in the

water. Bows, arrows, and spears they naturally make for collecting their food. Mr. Bonington had brought along a gun on the theory that "One never can tell," but it certainly proved entirely needless.

He, however, did know what he was about. More than once he had taken part in punitive raids against the natives when men had been killed, and it was solely due to his knowledge of and friendship with the Ongies that we were able to get into contact with them at all. Although inhabitants of the littoral, they showed every sign of being good jungle folk.

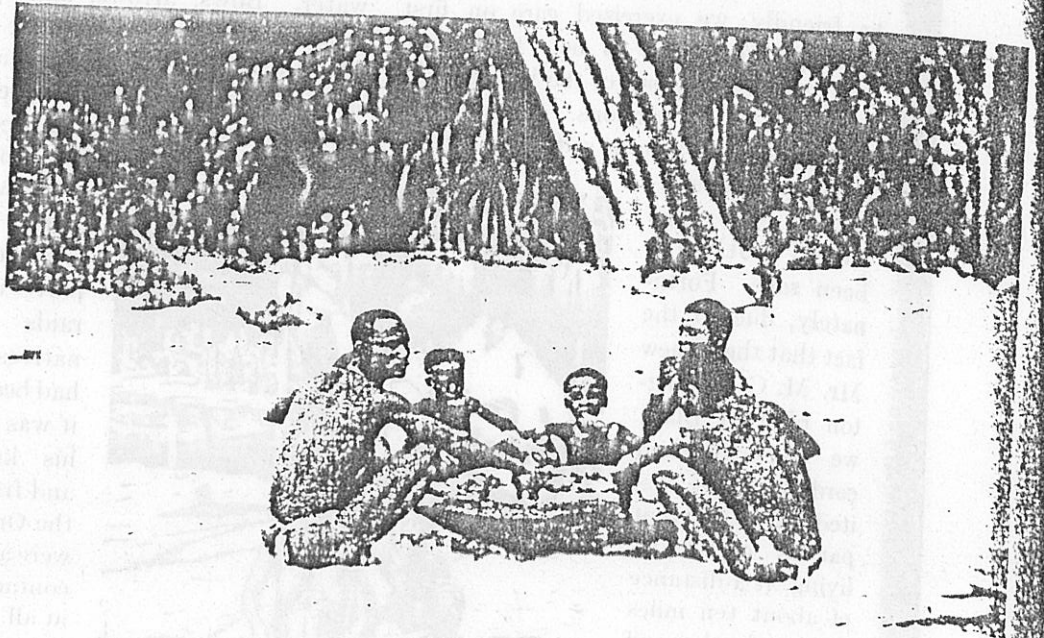
The trail to the inland camp where they were hewing out a dugout from a mammoth hardwood tree was none

too good. It was only a temporary trail through a virgin tropical forest. One had to walk carefully and, even at that, tripping over parasitic vines and stumbling over uneven places was quite the order of the day for the whites. Not so with the natives. Young and old slipped easily along without making a sound. One would not have noticed the clearing where their camp was until right on it. It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon and work for the day was over. Men, women, and children were idling about. Some had lain down on their rude beds. Of course they had known we were coming as news had filtered in to them from the shore when we landed and they had sent guides down for us. They, however,



BASKET WEAVING

The Andamanese have few domestic articles, using merely wooden receptacles for water, and native-made baskets



A TURTLE FEAST

When hungry, a native will catch a turtle, cook it in its shell, and then eat the meat directly from the shell

showed no signs of welcome on our arrival; as a matter of fact, they seemed to take little notice of us at all. For half an hour we stayed about the camp. A group of middle-aged females sat on the edge of the unfinished dugout and watched us with colorless expressions. These latter showed the illness of distended stomach in great prominence. Finally, accompanied by a few men as guides and several children, we made our way back to the shore. Two days we spent among the Ongies and during this time it seemed to become more and more apparent to us that we were in good standing with them, although their faces or actions barely ever changed or showed the least emotion. We had taken the precaution of bringing some presents: large leaf tobacco of the very coarsest type, clay pipes, and a few cheap cotton clothes that were immediately put on. None of the aborigines smoke, as they have no natural sources of tobacco, yet they take very kindly to it when it is offered.

At last, when we came to leave them,

quite a little procession escorted us to the shore where our boat was anchored. Although the farewells must have been mutual, outward manifestations were only from our side.

It is curious and interesting to note that, although the aborigines are living in a pre-agricultural and wood age, with none of the benefits the human race has derived from civilization, they are absolutely self-sufficient, lack nothing, and are happy. They live the life of their choice and have escaped all the ills that so frequently attend civilization. For years hostile to intruders, they have avoided contact with other peoples and so have escaped their numerous diseases. Food at all times can be acquired in abundance, and so scanty are their clothes that the problem of making them is an almost negligible consideration. Their arts, or rather industries, are the making of weapons and dugouts. Water, which is abundant during the long and severe period of the southwest monsoon rains, becomes scanty during the end of the dry