"Steel axes for Stone-Age Australians"

Author: Lauriston Sharp
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Name of group: Yir Yoront
Continent: Australia
Location: West coast of Cape York Peninsula
Subsistence Pattern: Foragers

- This article is a classic example of the holistic nature of the human condition and why anthropologists must use the holistic approach.

- I know the article is wordy, somewhat convoluted, and has typos, but use the questions below to help pull out the pertinent information.

- It is important when reading this article to be aware of the differences between form and function. Form in this case refers to the physical characteristics of the stone axe that result from the materials and technology by which it is constructed. Function relates to the ways - conscious and/or unconscious - the axe is used (Sharp refers in the article to the "role" the axe played). Those functions can be technological, social, or ideological, and may be a combination of all three as is described in this article.

- Consider the following as you read the article:
  1. Who owns the stone axe? Who can use it?
  2. What are the technological functions of the stone axe in the lives of the Yir Yoront (In other words, what are the "ordinary" uses?). What are the two cases in which use of the stone axe is strictly limited to men?
  3. What are the social functions of the stone axe? (In other words, how does the stone axe organize interpersonal relations?)
  4. What are the ideological functions of the stone axe? (also described in the article as "ideas, sentiments, values," and symbols)
  5. What are the expectations of Europeans when the steel axe is introduced?
  6. What are the actual impacts on the Yir Yoront when the steel axe is introduced?
  7. How is this article an example of holism?
  8. THINK: Can you think of a change (in technology, behavior, or belief) in your culture that had or is having far-reaching impact on other aspects of your culture?