

Singing for Peace

Christopher Bartlett

Only a couple of hundred foreigners each year get to experience the spectacular and unique event that is the Goroka Show – and it is a privilege to be one of them. Over a three-day weekend, closest to Independence Day on September 16, about 90 tribal groups gather in this Eastern Highlands town to celebrate their cultural diversity.

But despite being free to wander amid the riot of colour, singing, dancing, and feathers, it is far from a show designed for tourists. Quite the opposite.

The first Goroka Show was held in 1957, the brainchild of administrators and missionaries trying to stop virulent inter-tribal conflicts, and implemented by Australian patrol officers (PNG was under Australian administration until peaceful independence was arranged in 1975).

Instead of fighting over ancient feuds and cultural differences, the idea was to get together and celebrate diversity, take part in competitions, and intermix peacefully.

As unlikely as saying to loads of warriors, “Hey fellas, let’s quit this warfare lark and dance and sing together” sounds, the idea worked, and 55 years on is still going strong. These days the groups do not compete, however, not even for dancing and singing, while the once hotly contested archery and spear throwing events are most certainly out, presumably because they were not especially conducive to the goals of promoting peace. Quite rightly too, the organisers feel they cannot say one cultural dance is better than another without



A riot of colour, singing, dancing and feathers



Seeds and shells adorn women of the new Jiwaka province



More Mardi Gras than mountain man with a rainbow-coloured frame on his back



Asaro mudman in his clay mask



Child performer with a fake mustache representing an ob spirit

giving the feeling the culture itself is being judged. Nowadays each group has

a section of the showgrounds, and dances and sings there from 10am to 4pm each day.

There were many women's groups, wearing more birds in their head-dresses than you'd find in a wildlife smuggler's suitcase, their glimmering breasts sporting as many kina shells as they possess in order to display their wealth. Fierce-looking warriors with blackened faces in huge hair-woven berets jumped up and down in unison to the rhythm of their kundu drums, dissuading any challenge. Brightly coloured Mt Hagen warriors formed a formidable spear line, but chanted and whistled cheerily while grass-skirted Engan ladies danced and sang as their men beat out a tune on bamboo (and hardware store PVC) pipes with rubber thongs. One tribe had giant bird and butterfly frameworks on their

backs in a sort of Rio Carnival style; others acted out stories about spirits and ancestors in song, with shaven-headed

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children - their hair made into beards - playing the roles of pygmy ghosts. Hornbill beaks and wild pig tusks were proudly worn, and grasses and leaves used as dress and decoration in a myriad of ways.

Every tribe was stunning, although the



Rakapos warrior with his black hat of matted human hair



Having a rest



A foreign tourist stands out amid the many tribes

famed Asaro mudmen, with their white clay-covered bodies and giant clay head masks designed to make victims believe they were being attacked by spirits, could not be cajoled to perform by the organisers, choosing instead to sit in the shade and try to sell their masks and clay models.

In a rapidly changing world many PNG communities are adapting to the present,

while retaining and celebrating their inheritance – and their pride is evident as they enter the arena at Goroka. Each group has their own ancestral stories, dances, body ornamentation, ritual beliefs and practices, and more often than not, completely unique language.

It was not until the late 1930s that westerners seeking minerals entered the often impenetrable Highlands and they were amazed (as tourists remain today) by the cultural diversity and incredible range of social behaviours they encountered. In this setting it is not hard to imagine the diversity of culture, but the reality of the spectrum is so incredible that as a tourist you have to see it and experience it to believe it.

Set against a tradition of headhunting, cannibalism and black magic (where illness, death or other misfortune is

thought to be the result of sorcery rather than natural causes, and retribution exacted on suspected witches can be swift and severe) the sing-sings now serve to reduce the amount of real vendettas and wars through a competitive ‘dance-off’ rather than violent confrontations. Difference is celebrated and, combined with the 20,000 local visitors in the showgrounds, the whole event is a cacophony of colour and noise – hallucinatory in its overall effect.

Near the grandstand, the Rakapos warriors jump on the balls of their feet in time with the slow beat of their kundu drums; multi-layered, ankle-length woven skirts swaying as they repeatedly chant “ooosh-sha ooosh-sha”. Whatever the entomological origins of the word, the meaning was clear: “We are fierce.”

If more evidence is needed, look no further than their heads and enormous berets made from human hair. Originally taken from defeated enemies, now the hair is usually the warrior’s own, matted together to form an enormous black hat. The Rakapos are not alone in their use of human hair. The most famous are undoubtedly the Huli Wigmen who believe they are all descended from one original male ancestor – the son of the spirits, who was the first agriculturalist in their part of the country, covering the Tari forest and Tagari Valley region and the area around Mt Hagen in Enga Territory. Unfortunately the year I went they were a no-show.

In many PNG cultures, pigs are hugely important as symbols of wealth and status. Pig cults abound and their tusks

Gahuku Moho (Eastern Highlands) women: one of the many all-female groups



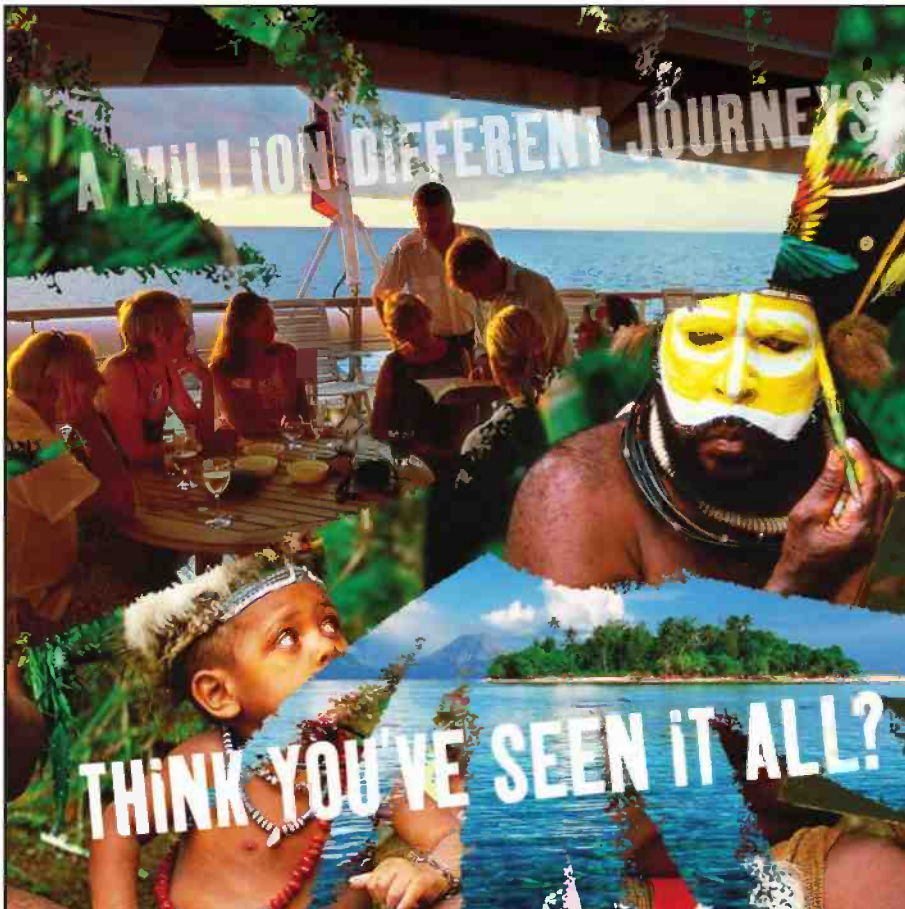
are used to adorn various parts of the body. For some tribes there are no hereditary big men (leaders); status comes instead from how many pigs you own and your prowess as a warrior. Men show their status through their body ornamentation and the different birds of paradise plumes embody a range of

potencies. Some birds of paradise symbolise qualities such as strength, courage, intelligence and prowess, and by donning wigs and costumes bedecked in their feathers, warriors believe they incarnate those powers, as well as losing their own identity to embody that of

their ancestors. Painting their faces aids in this loss of personal identity and red, yellow, black and white are applied in very specific patterns to their faces. Highland tribes

"Status comes from how many pigs you own and your prowess as a warrior..."

believe a mix of fat and ochre on their bodies, if applied before battle, will also render them 'invisible' to their enemies. Elsewhere are women in outfits made entirely of folded grasses and leaves, head-dresses of entire birds of paradise or cassowary, enormous neck collars made of kina shells (once used instead of money by sailors, then worn as necklaces when sailing or trading in a clockwise direction, or as bracelets to indicate a counter clockwise journey). Kamu, Huli, Yatmul, Imangan, Silimbuli, Osaro, Flying Foxes, Skeletons, Bee Tribe and



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Flower and-grass head-dresses

many more are on display, and often there are separate male and female groups from the same tribe.

Certain women's groups are more elaborate than others. The women of the Andakelkang are renowned for the most elaborate dress, with their head-dresses' heirlooms passed from mother to daughter throughout the generations. Before entering the showground, all the participants are rigorously checked over by the group leaders to ensure their instruments, body paint, costumes and weapons are in perfect order, much like preparing for a military parade.

The comfort of the individual wearer appears irrelevant – with heavy costumes worn and danced in for days. One such example is the enormous clay heads of the white-clay painted Asaro mudmen, whose masks have terrified enemies and petrified children of the Highlands for centuries. They are deliberately the misshapen faces from your worst nightmares – ghoulish and universally frightening!

The costumes are living heritage and not completely immune to change; some groups will use more modern materials and you may see plastic or glass beads, or lamp black used to darken the skin of the Flying Foxes, whose all-black costumes of capes and skin are brilliantly evocative of the actual animal, and which they will wear for days despite the fine black soot irritating their eyes.

Natural pigments applied with specially-softened twigs are used for body paints.



Cowry and other shells decorate an Andakelkang woman



Their origins range widely but include lime for white, soot for black, clay for brown, ochre for yellows and reds, as well as various plants, flowers, and berries and even scarab beetles for emerald blues. Body decoration here is no different to the status and statements expressed by western fashion – there are types of ornamentation for courting, marriage or grief at a death. But while more permanent body art is still visible, in many groups the old practice of female facial tattooing is dying out.

“The comfort of the wearer appears irrelevant with heavy costumes worn and danced in for days...”

Kina shells are regularly traded and incorporated as symbols of power and status into many types of costumes. They are most frequently worn as large necklaces hung via one or two holes, while some shells are worn as nose ornaments or chest plates hung like huge crescent moons over chests glistening with oils or body paint. Birds are incorporated in abundance – birds of paradise can hang whole from head-dresses, while other bird parts, such

Grass and cowry shell decorations



Young warriors in full dance

Snake men from the Highlands





A young woman displays her wealth with multiple kina shell necklaces



Boars' tusks add to the laborativeness of this costume

as the hornbill beaks, are very sought-after as symbols of courage and power. Grasses are used in simple but incredibly effective ways to make face masks, while the number of head feathers worn above the crumpled grass indicates the male wearer's rank. The Koropa-Rapadi wear head-dresses made of green leaves and look like they have emerged from a verdant forest. In contrast, the ethnic group from the Nawaeb region wear head-dresses shaped from wood. They are exquisitely coloured with plant dyes, decked with feathers then strapped to the dancer's heads. No two masks are the same and are entirely unique treasures – much like the show itself. Mt Hagen Show gets the props and more foreign visitors, but Goroka has many more tribes, a big local turnout, and everyone mixes in the middle of



Andakokang women dancers



A spear line of Highland warriors with kina shell substitutes on their chests

the sportsfield, including the 200-plus tourists who have made the trip. Many months later and back home halfway round the world, I am still amazed by the experience. It is a massive melting pot of

cultures, textures, colours and sounds; a sensory sensation on so many levels. I can't wait to go back. ▲

Christopher Bartlett

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A performer readily strikes an intimidating pose



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