

# The Facial Tattoos of Oro Province

Don Silcock

The beautiful tropical fjords of Cape Nelson offer some of the most spectacular scenery in Papua New Guinea. Combining the views with the excellent scuba diving on the isolated offshore reefs, it is easy to understand why the area draws visitors from all over the world.

The Tufi Dive Resort, situated as it is on the headland overlooking the main fjord and onwards towards Mount Trafalgar, offers a wonderful location to enjoy this special part of PNG.

But no visit to Tufi should be considered complete without some exposure to the local villages and their culture - either by attending one of the regular cultural demonstrations organised by the resort, or with a village homestay for a couple of days.

If you have the time... do both! While the homestays will take you right in to village life and provide a real taste of local traditions and customs, it has to be said that they are not for everybody as no electricity or running water is available. For this reason, most visitors opt for attending the cultural demonstrations.

The demonstrations are very well organised making it clear that the village elders take great pride in their traditional practices, such as sing-sings and sago harvesting. The unspoken undercurrent at such an event is that the elders are reinforcing both the cultural and financial value of these traditions to the younger members of the community.

From a cultural viewpoint, the demonstrations take the villagers away





Kojé village teenage girls.



A lemon plant thorn punctures the skin.



Kojé village women with full facial tattoo.



Male Kojé villagers in full traditional dress dance at the sing-sing.

from their day-to-day subsistence way of life as they prepare for the event by readying their traditional dress and artefacts, and rehearsing their sing-sing routines. The whole village seems to be involved in these preparations and I see this reinforcement of time-honoured practices as beneficial to the community.

Tufi Resort pays the villages to host events, which are rotated between the local communities in order that the benefits of tourism are shared as equally as possible. So, financially, in a society where the opportunity to earn money for essentials such as school books and cooking oil are few and far between, this really is a big deal.

The demonstrations are both visually spectacular and very interesting to watch, but after attending a few of them I became quite fascinated by the unspoken undercurrent. The body language of the elders clearly indicated that they were demonstrating the tangible value of their special local culture and traditions to the village community.

#### Facial Tattoos

One of the most visually intriguing aspects of the local villagers around Tufi are the facial tattoos worn by many of the women – something you would not really be aware of without making the effort to visit the village.

Tattoos, and body art in general, have enjoyed a significant renaissance in Western society over the last 40 years or so. They have become both a badge of honour for those seeking to firmly establish their non-conformity, and a trendy fashion accessory for others wishing to express their individuality.

So, it was quite fascinating to see them as an integral part of village customs rather than a recent phenomenon.

From an anthropological perspective the practice of using coloured pigment to make permanent marks on the skin has been found in almost every major culture in history – for example the Egyptians were using tattoos to decorate themselves around the time of the pyramids and the Chinese are known to have adopted them around 2,000 B.C.

Tattooing was especially prevalent in the South Pacific islands and the word itself is a derivative of the Polynesian/Samoan verb *tatu* – meaning to strike. The first recorded use of the word was in a 1796 diary entry by the British explorer Captain James Cook.

However, 20th Century colonisation, and in particular, religious missionaries who very much frowned upon the

practice, effectively wiped it out in many locations.

Of all tattoos, facial ones are the most striking, as they are so prominent and almost impossible to miss. The Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, are probably the most well known users of facial markings but rather than puncturing the skin and using a pigment; they actually carve grooves in the skin.

The practice is called *Ta moko*, and people of high social status would receive *moko* in a prominent place like their face, so that their special status was immediately recognisable.

#### Oro Province Facial Tattoos

Facial and body tattooing are reported to have been widely practised in coastal Papua at the time of first European contact. Many of these early tattoo patterns were said to have been quite



Kojé villagers in superb traditional dress.

simple, but the women of Tufi were known for their elaborate and intricate designs.

The tattoos are marked when a girl reaches her full maturity at around 18 years of age. As a visible indication of that “coming of age”, the tattoos announce that she is now ready for marriage.

The process of applying the tattoos is a long and painful one involving a technique that is only practiced by certain women in the village who have learned the skill from their mothers and

grandmothers. The completed facial tattoo can take up to two months. The tattooist applies the pigment in sections on a daily basis, which gives previously completed areas time to heal.

During this time, the girl lives with the tattooist away from the main village, in a special hut to shield her from the village males – particularly the young ones, and to avoid any embarrassment from the inevitable swelling of her face as the painful process is followed.

The actual tattooing is done each

morning for a couple of hours so that the girl can recover for the rest of the day. The process is repeated until the right amount of ink penetration is achieved and the tattooist is satisfied with the result.

The black ink used for the tattoos is made by mixing ground charcoal with water. The pattern is painted on the girl's face using the stalk of a taro plant, then a lemon plant thorn is used as a needle to pierce the skin so that the ink can penetrate and permanently stain the flesh.

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Male Bauwame villagers perform their part of the sing-sing.



Bauwame villagers in full traditional dress dance at the sing-sing.

The actual patterns are quite specific, with an overall pattern that identifies the Korafe tribe (the main tribe of the Cape Nelson area) and variations for the numerous clans that make up the main tribe – such as the Kandoro, Fiyogha, and Tawairi clans.

**Bride Price**

The completion of the tattooing is followed by a big celebration when the girl comes back to the village and the tattooist is presented with presents from the girl’s parents in recognition of the service provided.

Once the tattooing and the celebration is over, the girl is ready for marriage. A boy will “court” her to prove to her parents that he is of good character and worthy of their daughter. This is a big test for him that typically involves making a new vegetable garden for the parents or building them a new canoe or house to

demonstrate his skills as a man.

If satisfied, the parents delegate the girl’s initiation to her uncle, typically the mother’s brother, whereby the uncle makes the preparations for the actual wedding – a major celebration and feast in the village.

When the girl has married the boy, it is then her turn to be tested to prove her worthiness as a wife to his parents so that the bride-price can be evaluated and settled between the families.

**Cultural Exposure**

Tufi is a truly special location that combines exceptional scenery with the opportunity to scuba dive its fjords and the excellent offshore reefs.

I have been fortunate to make several visits to the area and extensively explore its waters while getting to know some of the local villagers. The scuba diving drew me to Tufi in the first place, and I was not

disappointed... but it was my exposure to the local villages and culture that made the whole experience truly memorable.

Tangible benefits in a subsistence lifestyle are extremely valuable, and by helping to organise homestays and cultural demonstrations, Tufi Dive Resort has done a great job in allowing the villages to benefit from the tourists who visit the area.

The village elders can also reinforce traditional cultures and practices with the young people in the villages. ▲

*Don Silcock*

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Airlines PNG flies from Port Moresby to Tufi, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, & Sunday.

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Bauwame villager in full traditional dress before Amuian Fjord.