



# The People That Time Forgot

Papua New Guinea is beyond compare when it comes to unusual cultural encounters. Peopled by tribes that were unknown to the Western world until recent years, it is truly the “last unknown.” Virtually the last inhabited place on earth to be

explored by Europeans, even today some parts of the country have made only the vaguest contact with the West. As one of the last unknowns open to adventuresome travelers and photographers, this captivating island-nation near Australia is blessed with a blazing color quilt of cultural enclaves, a blend of the bizarre and beautiful.

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*Above: Pieces of colored fabric swayed above the heads of the crowd*



*Eyecatching colorful feathers and vivid face paint were the order of the day*

One of the most colorful events in the world is the annual Goroka Show: a stunning tribal celebration held annually in the Papua New Guinea highlands. Nearly one hundred tribes from the surrounding regions gather in full regalia to sing and dance. Each group does its best to outperform the others in a frenzy of face paint, brilliant feathers, decorated bodies, and thumping drums. The shows, called sing-sings, were instituted as a way of gathering the tribes and clans together and showing them that the people from across the mountains weren't so bad after all.

Over eighty tribes were meeting in the town of Goroka when a group of photographers, who had traveled from the United States to Australia and then on to Papua New Guinea's bustling capital, Port Moresby, arrived to photograph this spectacular happening. Using a charter aircraft



*Long plumes of feather headdresses swayed as the tribes danced to drum beats*

the group passed over mountains and rain forests to touch down on Goroka's narrow airstrip in the middle of town.

Leaving the Bird of Paradise Hotel early in the morning, with the mist still hugging the nearby mountains, the group approached the showground. The streets outside were filled with tribal people smeared with pig fat and vegetable oils, their skins colored red or black with charcoal and ochre's.

From blocks away could be seen the long plumes of feather headdresses swaying as they approached the fairgrounds. Huge ivory white kina shells hung across the breasts of the highland women. Great totems of bamboo and vines were strapped to the backs of men, while pieces of colored fabric swayed above the heads of the crowd.

A large group of Minji women prepared for a performance by peering into hand mirrors while applying brilliant red face paint and then outlining their eyes with touches of lime white. Their long, sweeping, majestic feathers rocked with the slow movements of their bodies. The bright red and yellow face paint of the Minji tribesmen accented the charcoal blackened faces, framed by headbands of white beads and beards dusted heavily with white chalk.

When the Huli wigmen danced into view, their vibrantly painted yellow faces glowed with startling intensity. Huli men wear heirloom human hair wigs, which they turn up so as to resemble a pirate's tricorne, or turned down like a mushroom. A mark of manhood and thought to be a home of ancestral ghosts, the wigs are decorated with the wings and feathers of birds of paradise species. As



*The most bizarre tribesmen were the Asaro mud men, also called "bush demons"*



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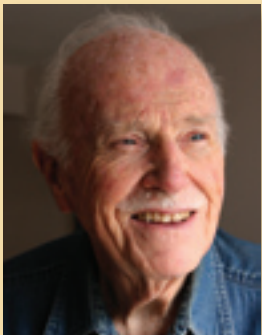
*When Huli wig men danced into view, their vibrantly painted yellow faces glowed with startling intensity*



*Photos © Henry Hamlin*

the Hulis danced, they were imitating the courtship display of the bird of paradise.

The most bizarre tribe to dance into the fairgrounds was the Asaro mud men, the best known of all Papua New Guinea tribal people. Also called “bush demons,” their whitish gray body clay, unearthly helmet masks, and their dangerously sharp bamboo “fingers,” necessitated a cautious approach with the cameras. But, they soon signaled



**Henry Hamlin**

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their willingness to be photographed, putting the group of cameramen at ease. This is true of all the dancers. They were delighted to be photographed.

As tribe after tribe marched into the fairground, photographers moved quickly from one group of dancers to another, shooting a prodigious number of images. An unusual intensity surrounded the event, exaggerated by the heat, the rising dust, the mingled smells of pig fat oils, and the repetitious beat of snakeskin drums. The stunning plumage, brilliant face paint, and the elaborate body decoration of the dancers make the Goroka show one of the most spectacular and riotous cultural events in the world.

Since this photographer is a devoted slide film user, the choice for this colorful event was Velvia 50, utilizing a Nikon 8008 SLR camera. Since dancers and drummers were constantly on the move, the Tamron 28-200 lens was used at all times. Over twenty rolls of film were shot. No special filters were utilized, just an 81A warming filter. Sounds like heresy but almost everything was shot on the “program” mode.

The tribal sing-sings of New Guinea await the intrepid photographer who wants an adventure that is demanding but not overly strenuous. By choosing a travel company who specializes in this type of adventure, with everything arranged beforehand by skilled and knowledgeable leaders, the group was whisked from one place to another with a minimum of fuss.

This special journey was an opportunity to meet and photograph some of the world’s most uncommon people, the people that time forgot. ■

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*Masked dancers provided comical relief*