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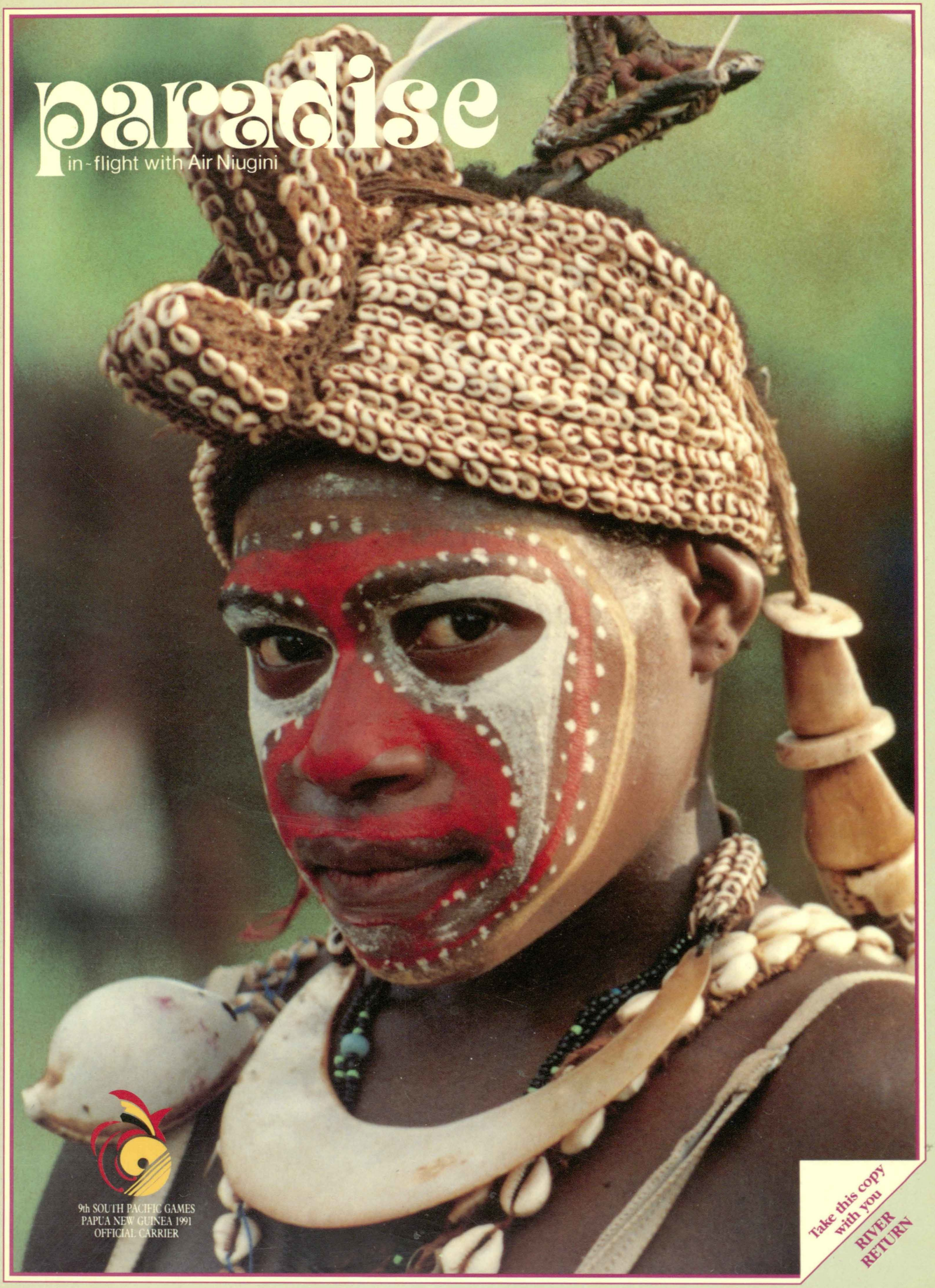

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Welcome aboard!

During a visit to Iwa Island east of the Trobriand Islands, Jean-Michael Cousteau and Richard Murphy were shown how villagers use spiderwebs as lures and nets, and they have detailed this experience for us.

PNG's National Museum preserves artefacts of the nation's history and seeks the return from overseas museums of thousands of valuable pieces taken since the days of the country's first contact with Europeans.

Enjoy these and other articles including how traditional medicine still offers cures for ailments that defy modern, Western medicine.

Joseph J. Tauvasa MBE
Chairman
National Airline Commission

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Cover: Kwoma girl of Bangwis village on the Sepik River. Photograph by Laurie Bragge.

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OK TEDI MINING
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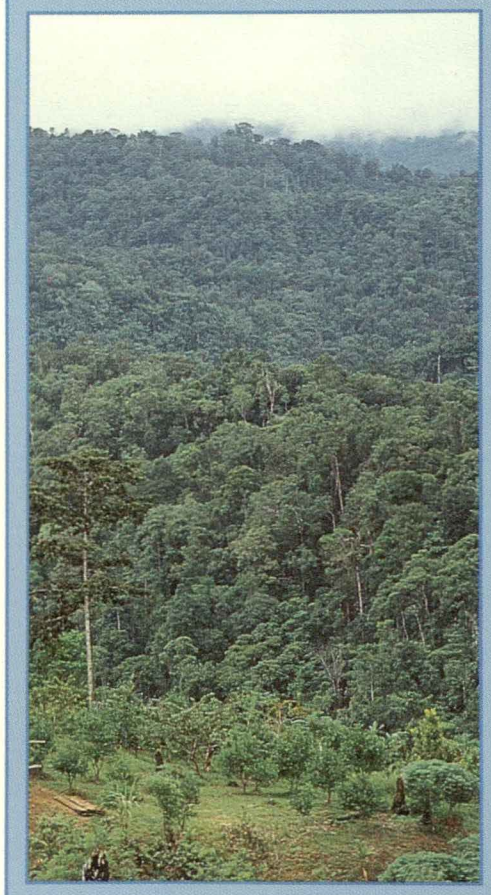
Mouthbows and Bilas

Story and photographs
by Steve Harvey

Left *Oro Province singsing performer, a long way from home in the Star Mountains.*
right *One of the Great Australian Bowing Company's unusual handmade musical instruments.*

Papua New Guinea is a country well known for its diversity of people and culture, reflected in a rich heritage of music and dance. Even so, a recent performance in the remote Star Mountains region of PNG's Western Province was probably one of the most unusual ever seen in the country.



Above *Jungle-clad Star Mountains country.* **top centre** *The Great Australian Bowing Company blends music of Europe, Melanesia and the South Pacific.* **right** *Oro Province singsing group.*

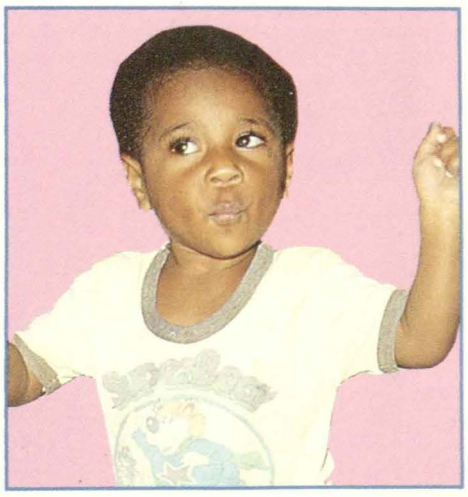
Dancers dressed in metallic jewellery made from industrial scraps, covered in body make-up and perched on metre-high stilts, appeared wraithlike as they emerged for their performance. One Star Mountains mother, baby on hip, found it all too much and fled for the safety of the nearby jungle to watch the performance. In a country where puri-puri, or sorcery, is an everyday belief, her reaction was not surprising.

Nothing sinister was going on. It was just a unique meeting of two ends of the cultural spectrum and as the performance started, curiosity overcame her fear and she emerged to get a better view of these extraordinary entertainers. The subject of her curiosity was the Great Australian Bowing Company, which was performing in the PNG mining town of Tabubil as part of the annual Hamamas Wik, or Happy Week, festival.

The annual festival, organised by Ok Tedi Mining, is a celebration of music, culture and sport. The Sydney-based Bowing Company was a special guest, performing alongside bands and singsing groups from around PNG. Led by Colin Offord, the Bowing Company is internationally recognised at the forefront of a new wave of Australian music, a blending of Celtic and jazz traditions with the influences of Aboriginal, South-east Asian and South Pacific elements.

The company, which performs music and dance, entertained the 5,000 people living in Tabubil township and village people from surrounding areas. Their music is performed on a unique range of handmade instruments, including the Great Island mouthbow, moonbells, Australian flute and windpipes and traditional natural instruments, such as conch shells.

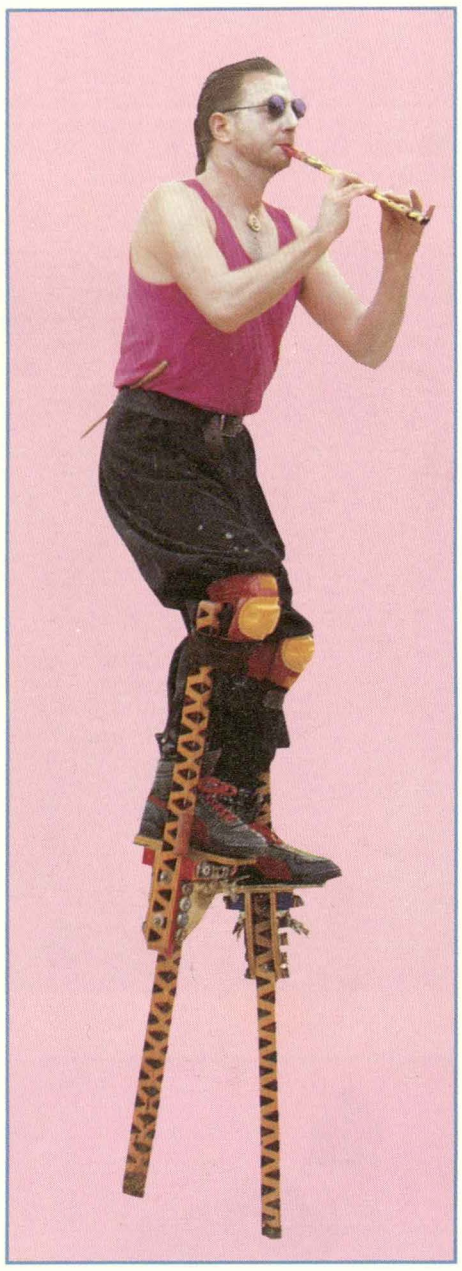
Part of the Bowing Company performance is 'musical stepping' or dancing performed on stilts. Local villagers found this intriguing and the more daring among them tried out the stilts, to the general mirth of all.

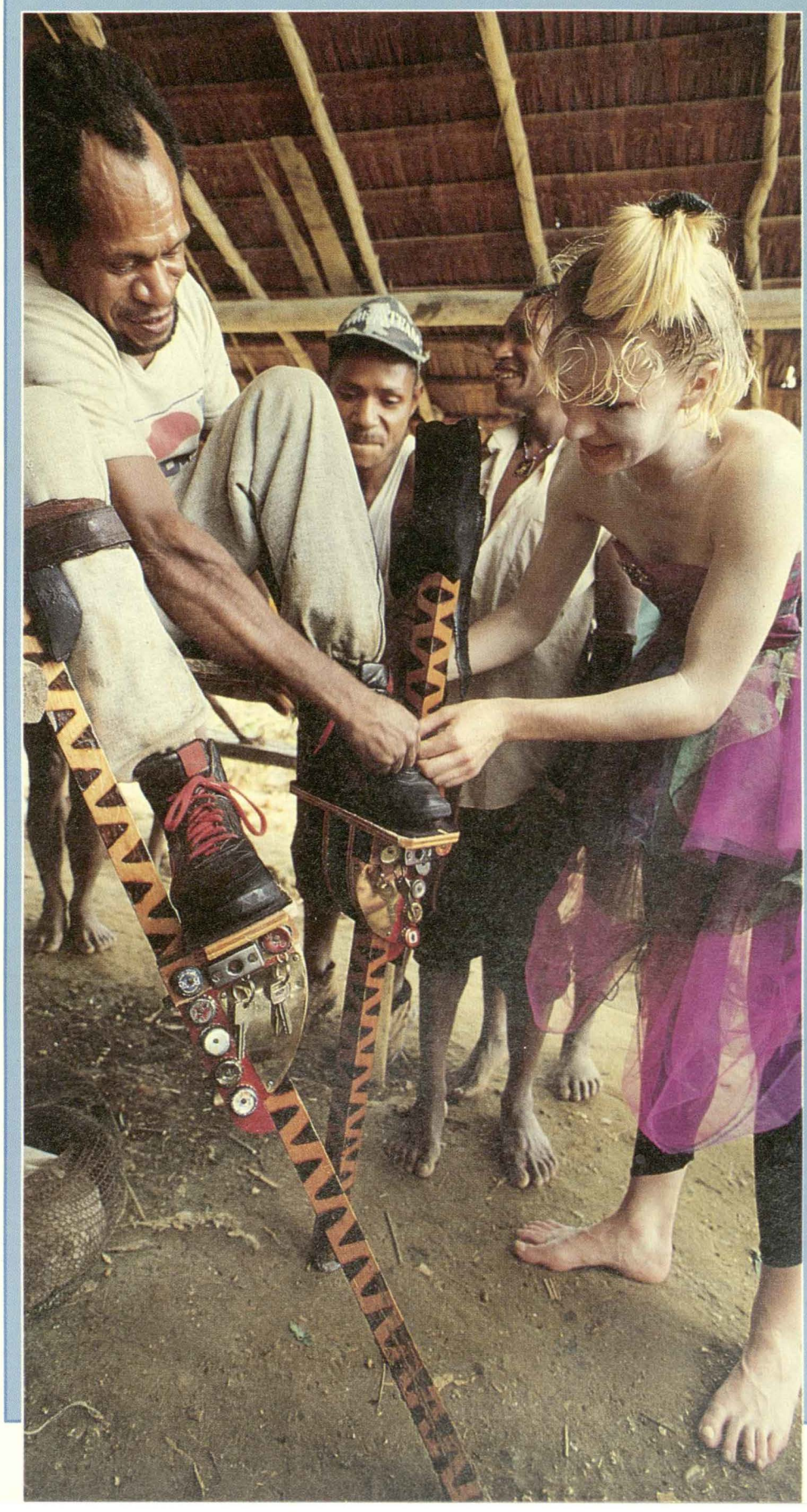


Above *Youngster getting the mood of Ok Tedi Mine's Happy Week.*

Above *'Musical stepping' on stilts, probably seen for the first time in PNG.*

Right *Mixed emotions from the Happy Week audience.*





Clutching the rafters of the roof in the village market for initial support, they found it more difficult than it looks!

More familiar to Star Mountains residents were the singsing groups in their bilas (finery) flown in for the festival from other PNG provinces.

From the nearby Oksapmin area on the Irian Jaya border came a singsing group dressed in traditional split cane, penis gourds and very little else.

From Madang, the beach resort on PNG's north coast, came the famous Madang Bamboo Band whose performers coax melodic tunes from giant bamboo pipes, with the aid of rubber thongs.

Oro Province contributed a singsing group dressed in tapa cloth finery, fabric made from tree bark and painted with natural dyes.

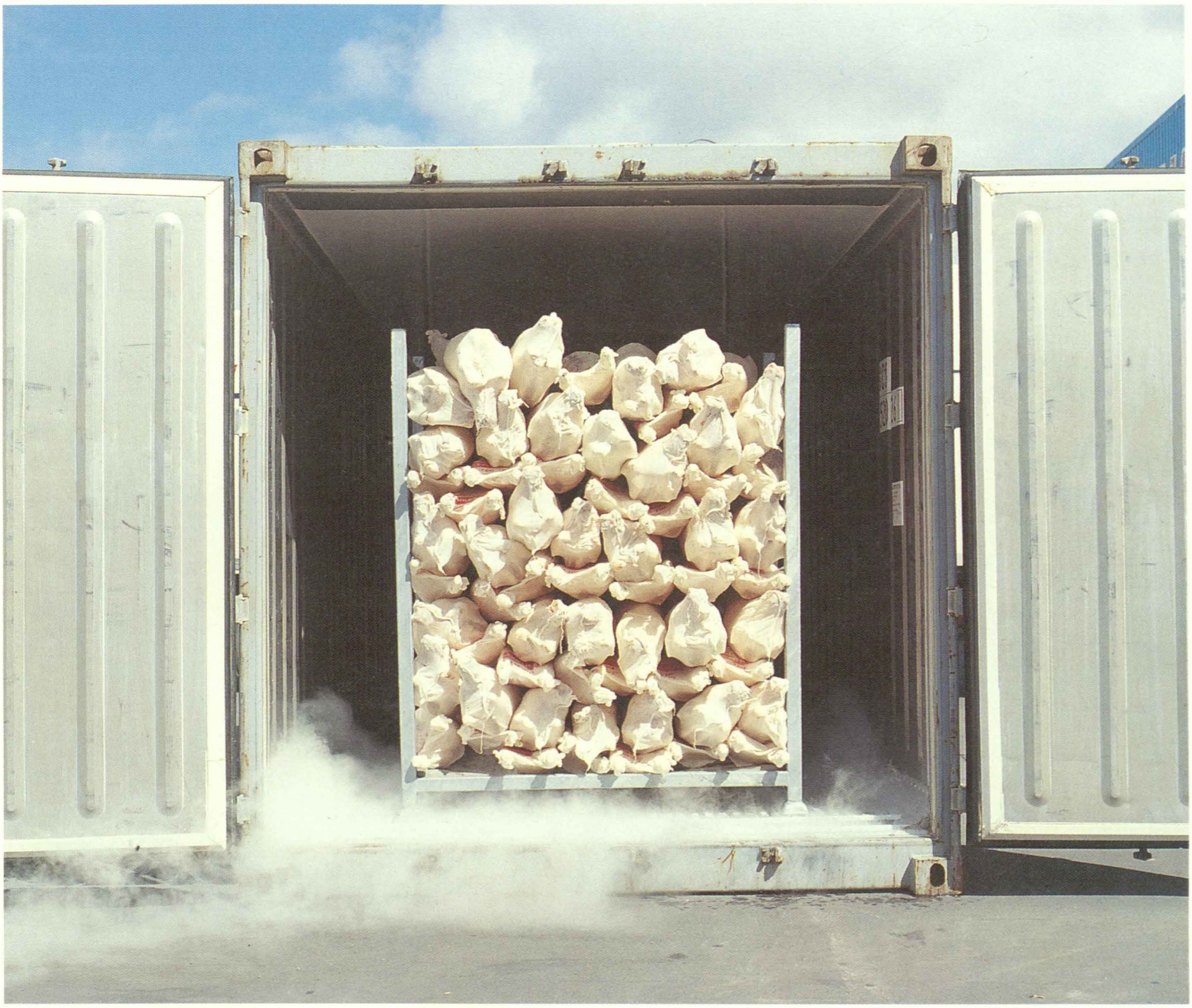
Hamamas Wik is organised by Ok Tedi as part of its extensive recreation program for its workforce and their families. The mine, located in the isolated Star Mountains just 18 kilometres from the Irian Jaya border, employs 2,000 people and in 1989 contributed 42 per cent of PNG's export income from the sale of gold and copper concentrate.

Despite its isolation, Tabubil is home for Papua New Guineans from all the country's 19 provinces and a sprinkling of other nationalities. Hamamas Wik is a celebration of the town's multicultural character.

In a country where even neighbors are isolated from each other by the daunting geographical terrain, the annual festival provides Star Mountains residents a glimpse of the cultural richness from other parts of PNG and in this case, a taste of new wave Australian culture.

The Bowing Company, such a success at Hamamas Wik, returned to PNG later for a national tour as part of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs' cultural exchange program.

Above *'Musical stepping' with accompaniment.* **right** *Audience participation was harder than it looked.*



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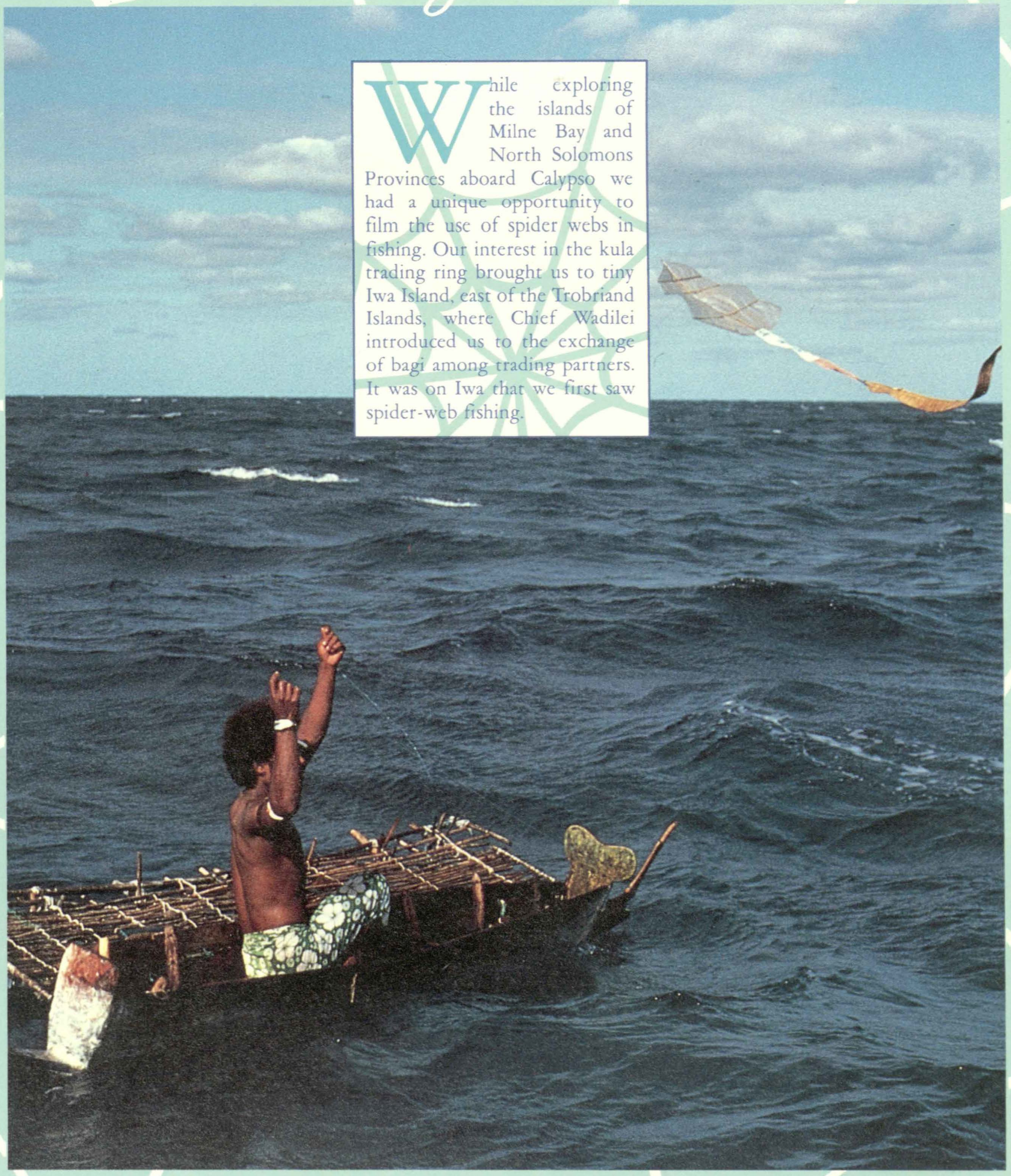
SPIDERWEB

Fishing in PNG.

Below *Iwa Island fisherman launches web lure on a kite tail.*

While exploring the islands of Milne Bay and North Solomons Provinces aboard Calypso we had a unique opportunity to film the use of spider webs in fishing. Our interest in the kula trading ring brought us to tiny Iwa Island, east of the Trobriand Islands, where Chief Wadilei introduced us to the exchange of bagi among trading partners. It was on Iwa that we first saw spider-web fishing.

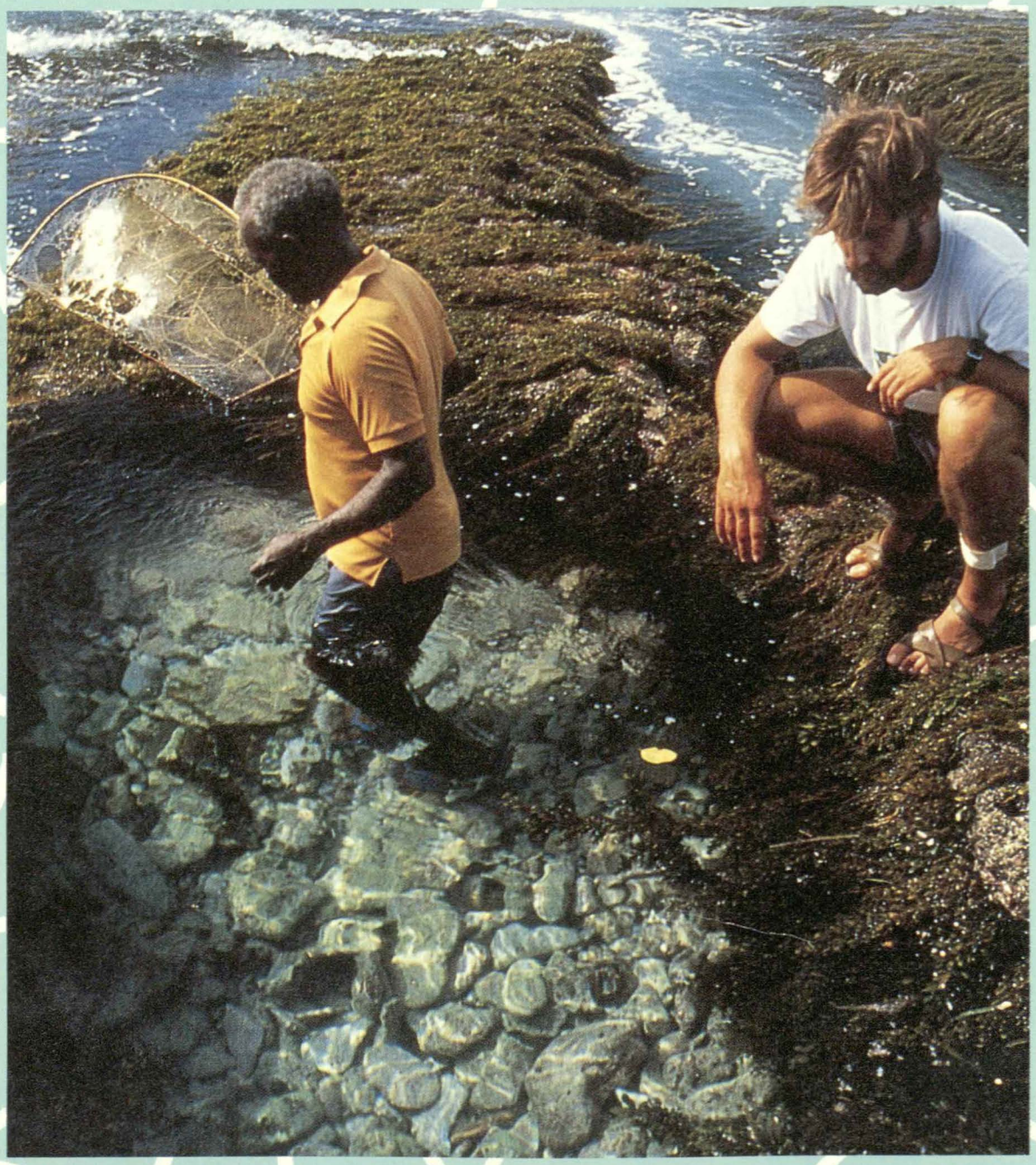


Story and photographs by Jean-Michael Cousteau and Richard Murphy

Local fishermen took us into the jungle where the webs were collected with wooden hoops. When enough of these webs were obtained they were taken to the beach on a windy side of the island. Kites made from twigs and leaves were then brought out and the webs were attached to each kite's long tail. Paddling out onto the windy sea in their canoes, fishermen sail the kites with the bundle of spider webs just skipping along the surface. Eventually this attracts garfish (needlefish) which attack what they think is a meal. Their long, needle-like beaks then become entangled in the webs and the fish are hauled in.

Our next stop was Bougainville Island in North Solomons Province. There we learned of a completely different strategy of spider-web fishing. We observed webs being collected in a manner similar to that on Iwa, but this time the webs were carefully spread across a hoop so as to make a dip net. Fishermen then waded into shallow tidal pools and herded small schools of fish into a corner where they were scooped up. These fish were used for food and bait.

In 40 years of exploring the sea, we found these fishermen to be among the most unusual and resourceful we have met.



Top *Netting bait-fish in a Bougainville rock pool.* **above** *Part of the catch.* **left** *Spiderwebs collected on Iwa.*

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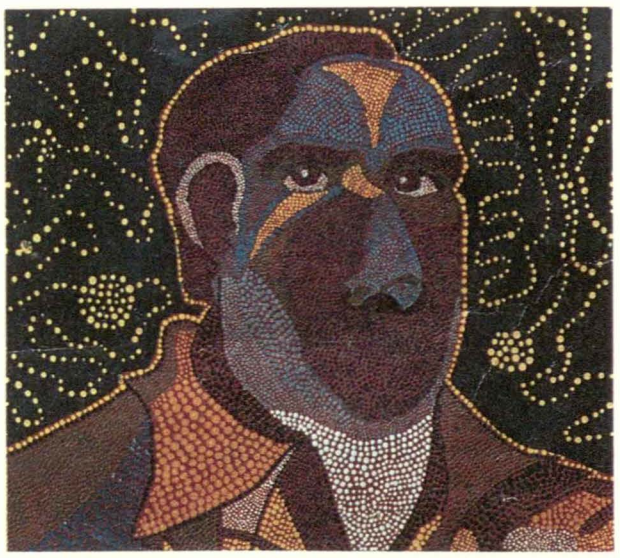
Above *Untitled acrylic on canvas by Ratoos.*

RATOOS

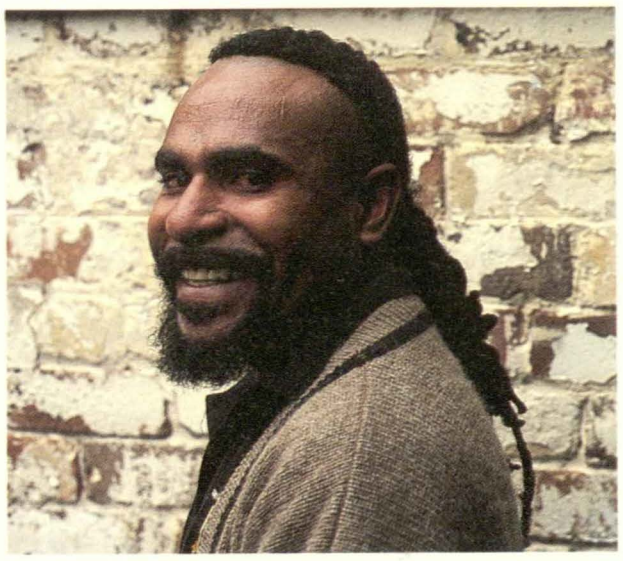
Story and photographs by Liz Thompson

Above *Floating figures typical of Papua New Guinea expressed in dots of the Australian desert artists.*

Below *'First Colonizer'.*



Below *The artist, Ratoos.*

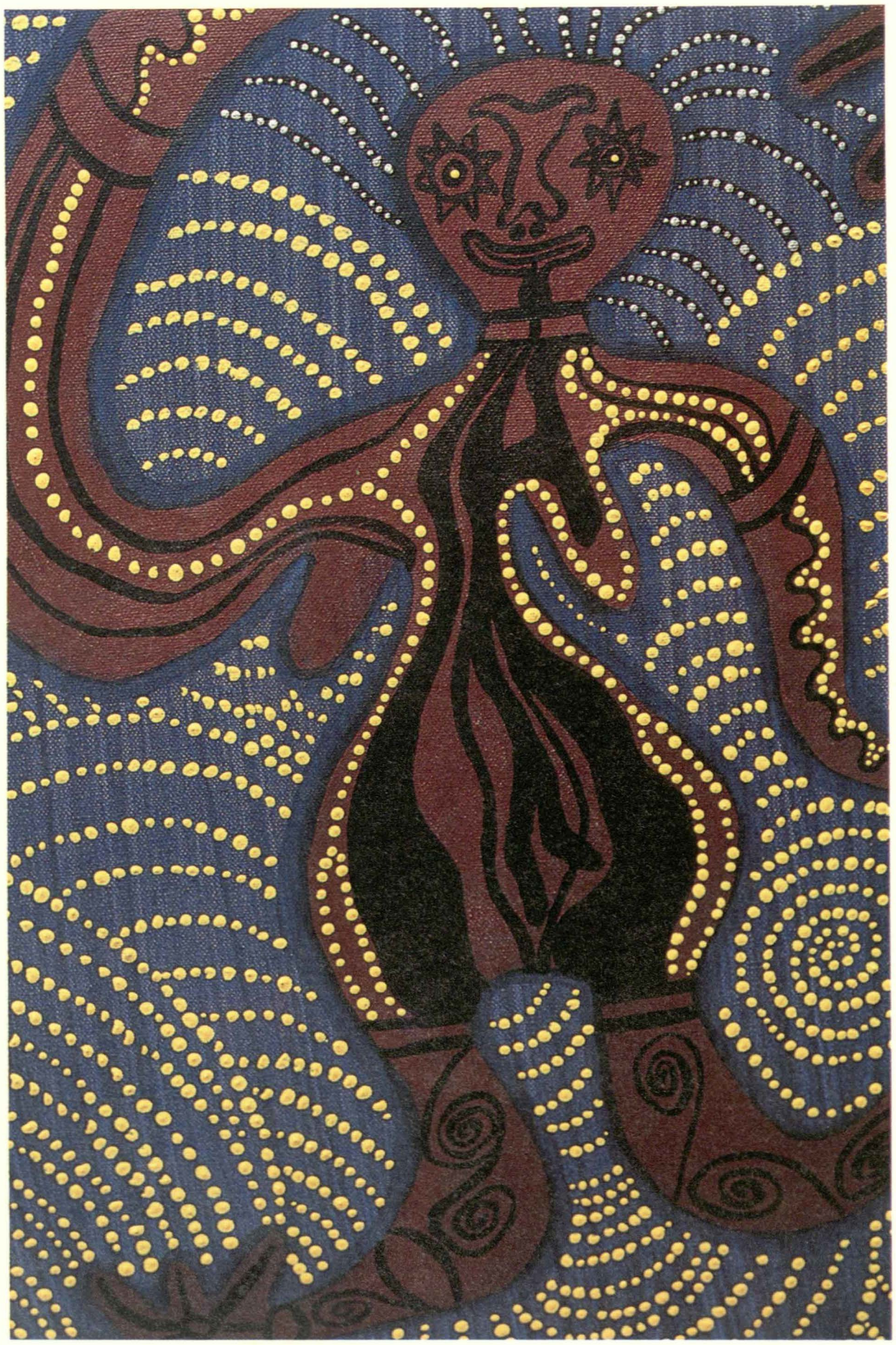


His work is an attempt at cultural cross pollination. "Aboriginal people have similar legends to the people in PNG but they don't talk much about PNG. They should look to us and other neighbors for inspiration. Instead most artists travel to other parts of the world, particularly Europe. In PNG, we have more than 700 languages and very rich culture. People should look towards their neighbors, see how legends connect,

I met Ratoos at an end of year show at Eora Aboriginal Art School in Sydney. He was a student and his paintings stood out because of their curious combination of Papua New Guinean design and Aboriginal dot patterns associated usually with the Papunya region in Australia's Northern Territory. Ratoos is from Irian Jaya but lived in PNG for many years. His paintings frequently describe stories of traditional legends from the Orokro language, stories his family told him. Ratoos now lives in a small house on the very busy Parramatta Road in Sydney, painting and frequently travelling overseas to exhibit his work and most recently to lecture at Cambridge University in England where he taught on religious systems and spiritual beliefs.

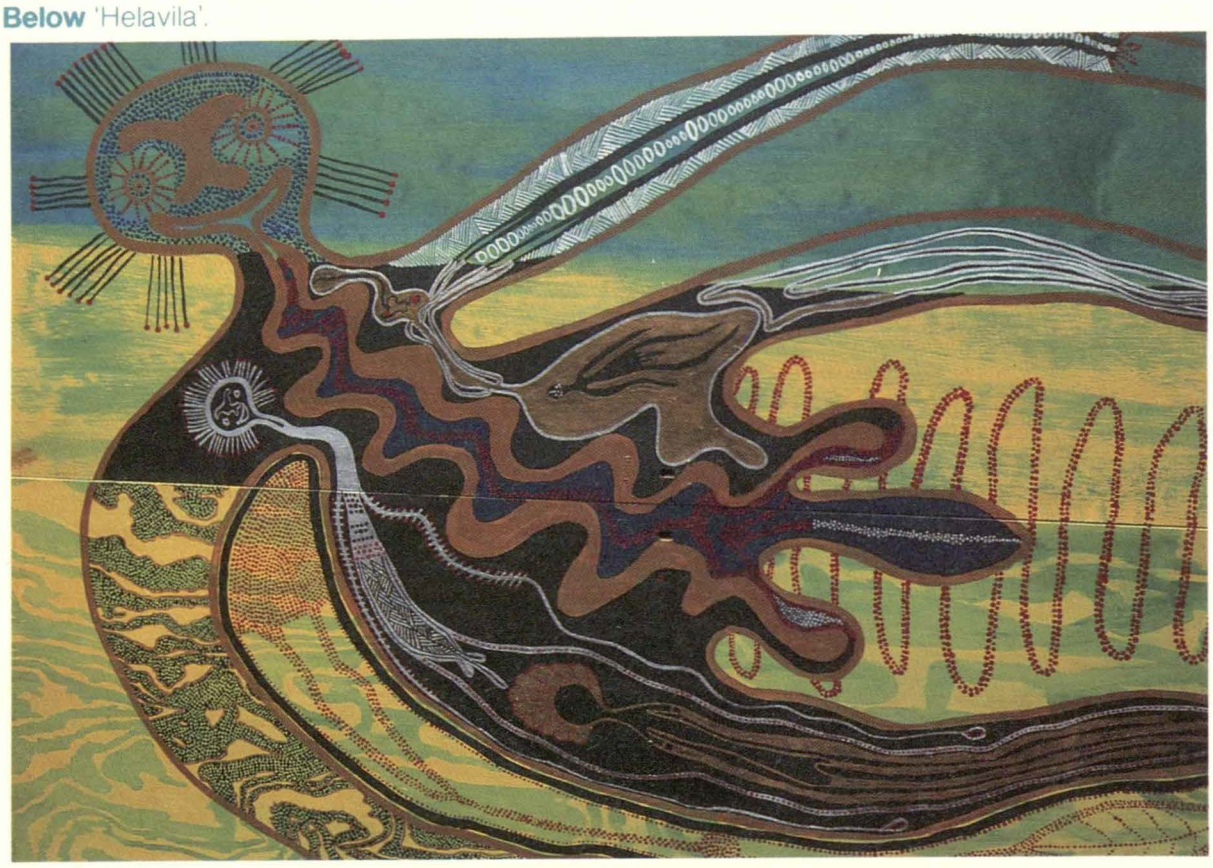
When he was 20, Ratoos travelled to Europe, coming to Australia in 1979 and gaining citizenship two years later. He sells most of his work in Europe. "The money is much better overseas than in Australia," he said. "Indigenous art is very big on the European market and they seem to like the cross cultural element of my style."

Ratoos talks about the problem of the indigenous cultures in the South Pacific region appropriating European artistic styles. "I used to paint a very European kind of painting," he said. "Marilyn Monroe, things like that, but I changed it. The Eora centre taught me a lot; how to mix colors. I put a lot of beautiful colors in my painting. They're not dull, they're always bright and human."

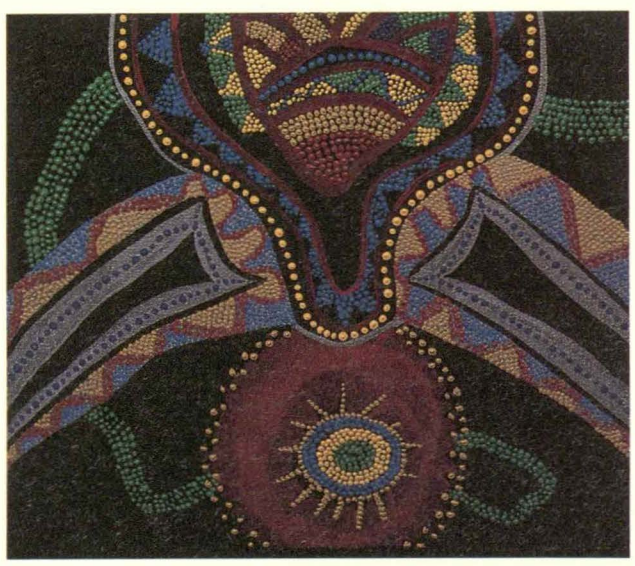


Above *X-ray painting of a fertility symbol, reminiscent of both Australian and PNG art.*

Below 'Helavila'.



Right *Detail, showing the brightly colored, dot matrix style in a work by Ratoos.*



things like that, and develop a more regional view."

Ratoos's work illustrates these philosophies. A recent set of his Christmas cards depicted current black issues world-wide, one of the most powerful was of the late South African activist Steve Biko.

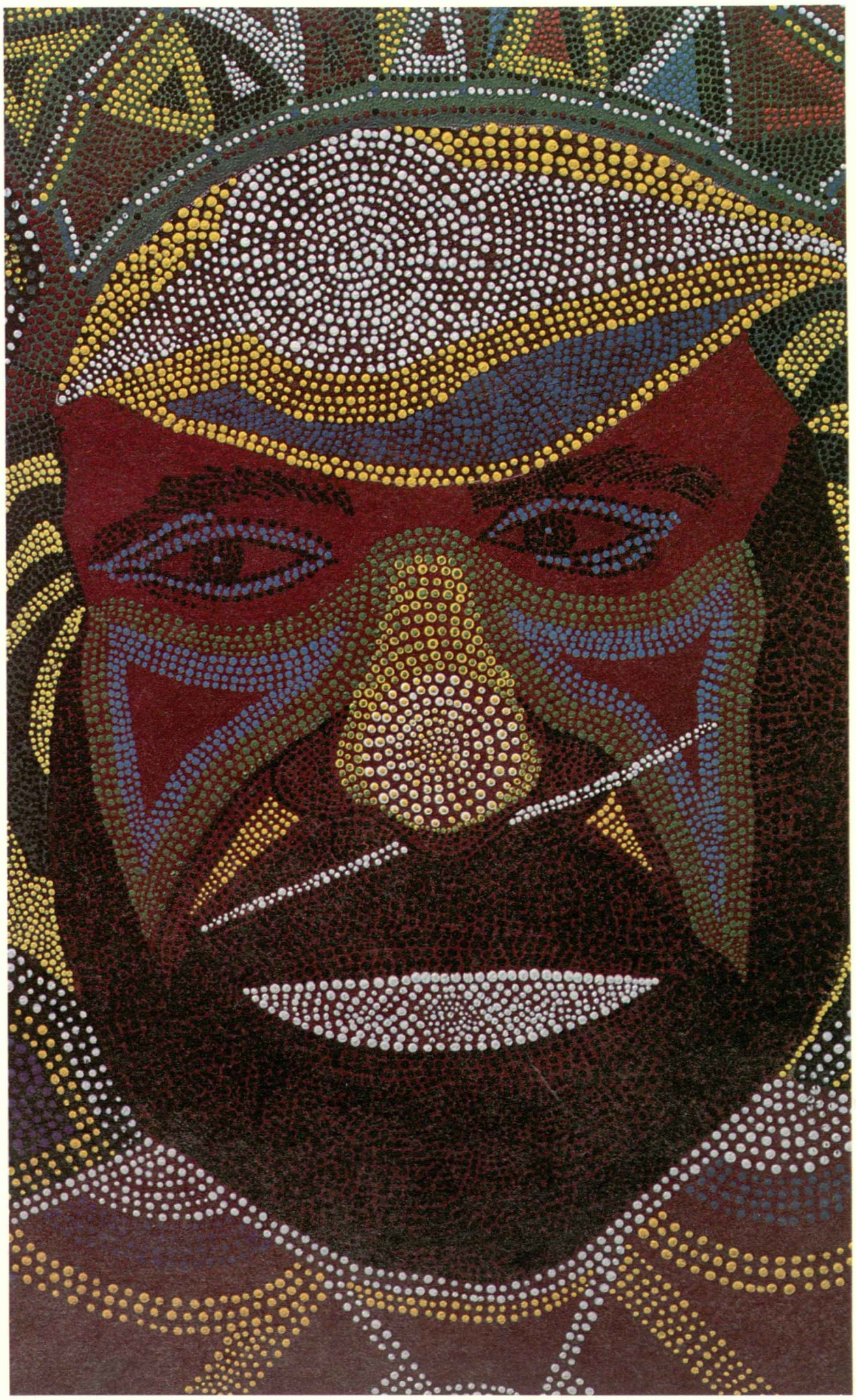
"In this generation every black race has had problems which they have had to face up to and this is my way of helping," he said.

He believes contemporary painting about the experiences of indigenous peoples is an important expression of their continued evolution. "Contemporary culture is very important. We have to teach others. If we don't, all the Melanesian and Polynesian art will die out. Culture dies very easily. It dies every day, every minute, and we have to do our utmost to keep it alive, to be part of its evolution for generations to come."

His paintings of highly decorated tribal men, made up of hundreds of tiny yellow dots, link with his traditional cultural themes and his contemporary experiences. "The dots started when I was doing

Above *Fertility symbols in the x-ray style.*

photography. I developed the idea of photographic dots after I saw how many beautiful dots made up the body in a photographic image." He uses, as did Litchenstein, the idea of the dots which today make up many of the images we see and incorporates them with traditional subject matter.

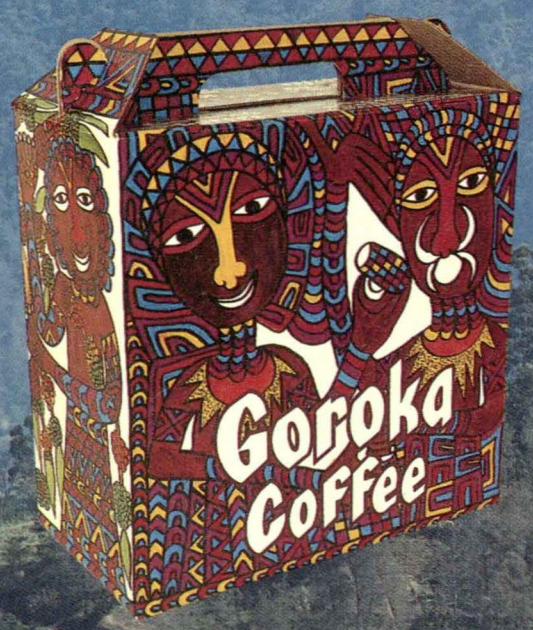


Above *PNG Highlands tribal warrior.*

Strange floating figures, so typical of the use of space by Papua New Guinean artists who don't seem to feel the need to anchor things to the ground. Interesting images of women which bear references to traditional fertility symbols. Sand images of people within which you can see organs, hearts, spines, not dissimilar to Aboriginal x-ray paintings which depict an almost cross sectional view of many of the animals they hunted and killed. This x-ray vision is very prevalent in much contemporary Papua New Guinean art and is particularly interesting in paintings by Ratoos who has concentrated his learning at an Aboriginal art college.

His bright colors depict tribal warriors and stout, serious, middle aged men. His work interestingly marries the old and the new and cross references with the visual element of other Pacific cultures. He would like to see more Papua New Guinean art being bought in Australia. "There are a lot of good painters in PNG but they end up doing different things because they can't earn the money from their art in PNG. I'd like to see the support coming from other areas of the world to help these artists to survive." This is one of the reasons he left PNG and why he continues to exhibit overseas. He recently returned from a successful exhibition in New York where he hung 30 pieces mixing them with traditional carving from PNG.

His work is as much a celebration of his culture as it is an attempt to discuss the issues which face indigenous cultures. Through drawing on various cultural influences he attempts, artistically, to bring about greater understanding between diverse groups of people.



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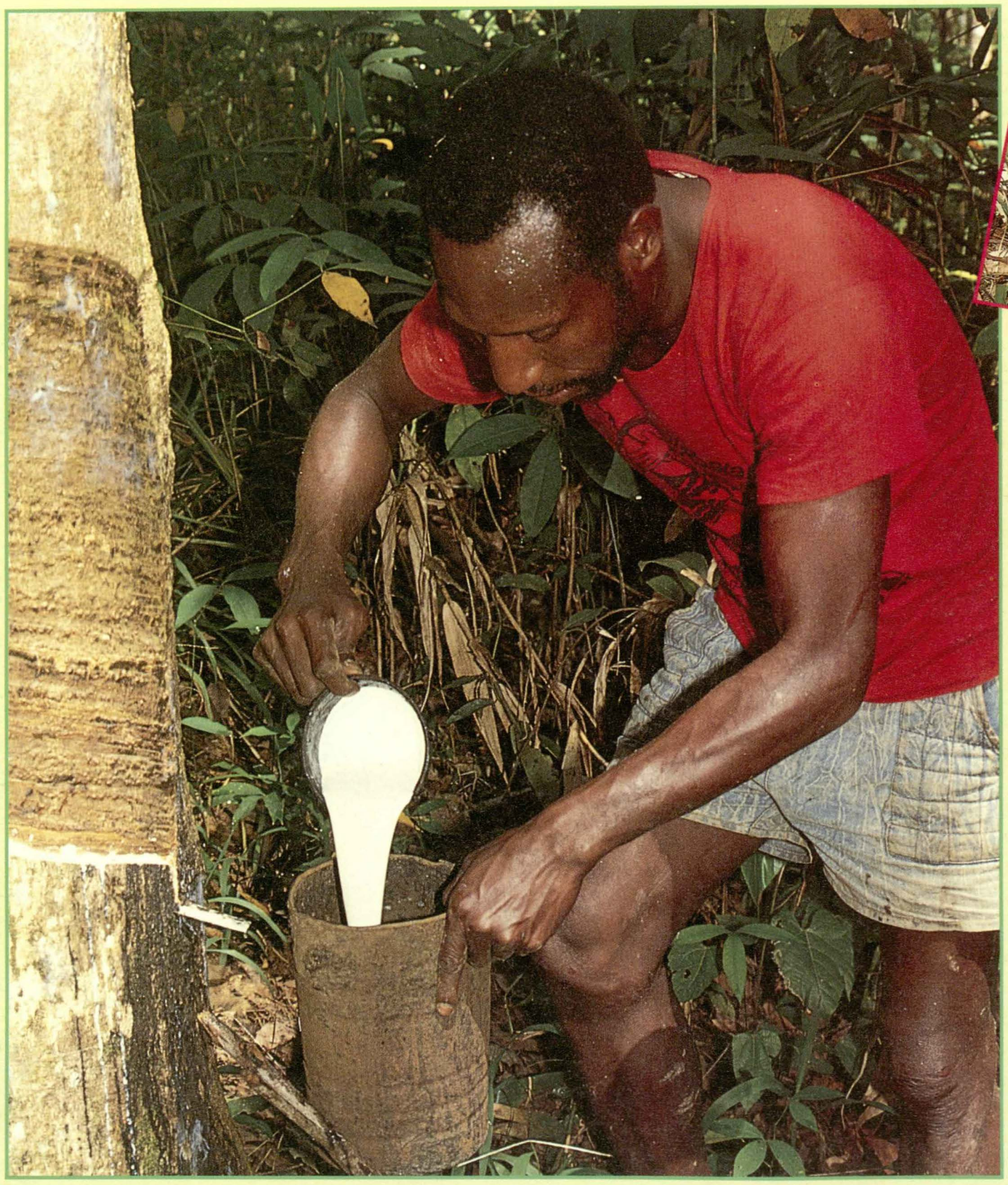
RUBBER

Below *Collecting latex from a rubber tree on the daily round.*

ON THE REBOUND

Story and photographs by Keith Briggs



Above left *Coconut shells make handy tapping cups.* **above right** *Liquid latex goes into moulds to solidify.*

Right *Pouring liquid latex from the tapping cup.*

Right *The morning collection of latex accumulates in the moulds.*

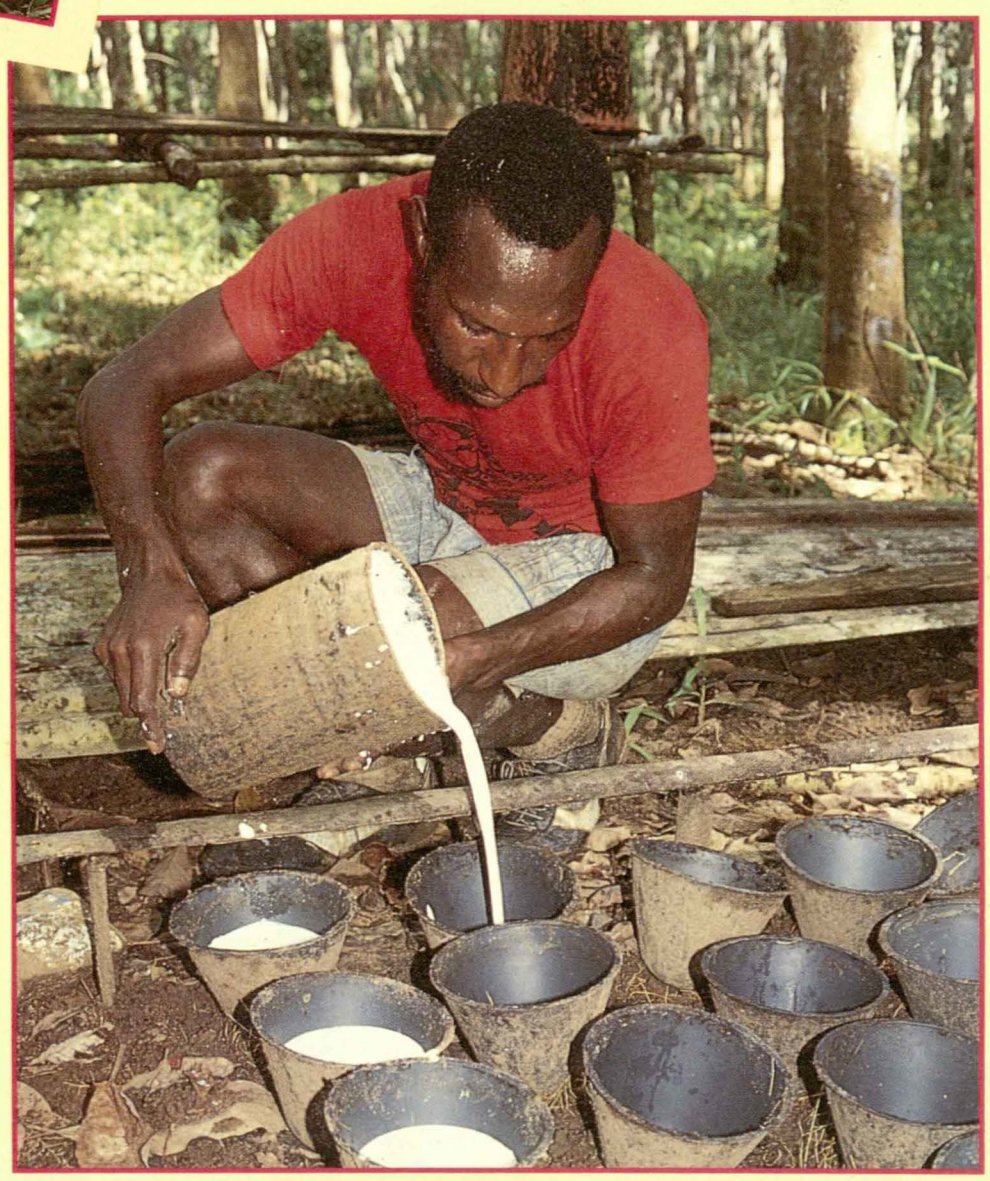
Rubber planters from other countries established one of the earliest foreign industries in Papua New Guinea. Many coastal areas have a history rich in stories of the days of the colonial planters who were often the first white people the villagers had ever seen. Some of these colorful characters were an influence for good and some otherwise, but the fact remains that the impact of the outside world on PNG and its people began when the sails of the planters' boats were first sighted along the coasts.

On long defunct plantations, local people can point out the vine and creeper covered remains of the rubber processing plants, where pieces of machinery, the processing vats or the smoke houses once stood, and reminisce about the good old days. Most of the once flourishing plantations are now little more than memories but some still operate.

In the heyday of the colonial plantations many Papua New Guineans were employed, the process of producing rubber being labor intensive. High capital outlay was required for buildings and plant which meant that very few villagers could even dream of being planters or producers of rubber in their own right. This has changed dramatically through the development of a simpler process for producing raw rubber so that today many private individuals work and manage their own plantations.

During the 1970s the Department of Primary Industry in the Balimo area of the Western Province promoted a program of establishing village rubber projects, providing advice and seedlings. This encouragement

Right, from top
The daily routine builds up the stores of latex ready for shipment.



has paid off for men far sighted and patient enough to nurture their trees and keep the scrub from overwhelming them. Today along the Aramia River, men like Saeni Daligi are tending plantations which average about 250 trees.

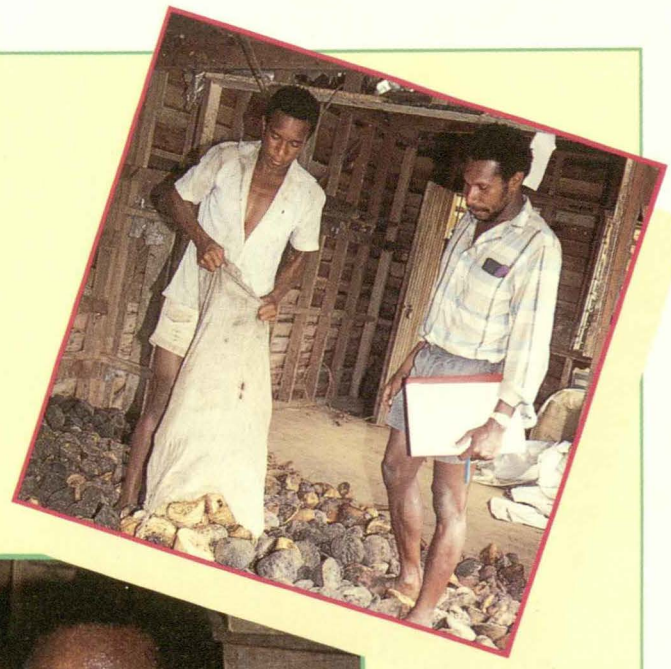
The rubber tree exudes a milky white latex when the bark is cut or wounded. When the trees are about 8 to 10 years old, tapping can start. Because latex flows more freely when the air is cooler, work starts early in the mornings. A gouge-like tapping tool is used and the first incision is made about 1.5 metres from the ground. A slightly downward spiralling cut extending half way around the trunk is made into the cambium layer from where the latex seeps. At the lower end of the cut a small v-shaped spout, pressed into the bark, carries the latex into half a coconut shell, a tin or plastic cup.

Cutting only halfway round the tree does not impair its life and growth. When the cuts eventually reach the base, the bark has grown over the higher ones and the tapper can begin again on the opposite side.

By the time the tapper has attended all his trees the latex has stopped flowing in those done first. It is time then to go around with a bucket collecting latex from the cups. After emptying and replacing the cups a few more drops may drip into them, so before tapping next time he will remove the congealed pieces of latex and peel long strips of it out of the cut. These scraps are placed in a separate container.

Plastic moulds are set out ready to receive the liquid latex. The tapper tosses the congealed scraps into them before pouring in the freshly collected latex.

Top *Rubber plantations are labor intensive, preparing latex moulds (left) and delivering them to the buyers.*



Right *Reward for the hard work comes when the raw latex is weighed and paid for.*

They are left to set and are covered to prevent rain diluting the product.

Trees are usually tapped every second day.

The next day the tapper removes the now congealed latex from the moulds and places them to dry on slatted shelves under a thatch roof. Although they dry out in about 24 hours, a week must elapse before the moisture content is low enough for them to be sold. A tree would yield about 200 grams dry weight of rubber each tapping.

Latex dries out quite tough and, well, rubbery. Cutting with a sharp knife reveals an open porous texture. The tapper bags his rubber and carries it on his back or by canoe to Kawito where it is weighed and bought by Pasuwe Ltd, who ship it to Port Moresby.

Working away under the canopy of their trees, swatting mosquitoes, the tappers probably give little thought to the fact that manufacturers take the fruit of their labors and make more than 30,000 rubber products. Many would be unmindful of the millions of rubber tyred wheels running on the roads of the world. They may not even stop to consider that some of the white latex that oozed from their trees could have been used to make the bladder of their soccer ball. Whether they know or care does not affect the pleasure that is theirs when they leave their buckets, moulds and tapping knives in the drying house and join their mates on the flat by the river for a vigorous game of soccer in the afternoon.

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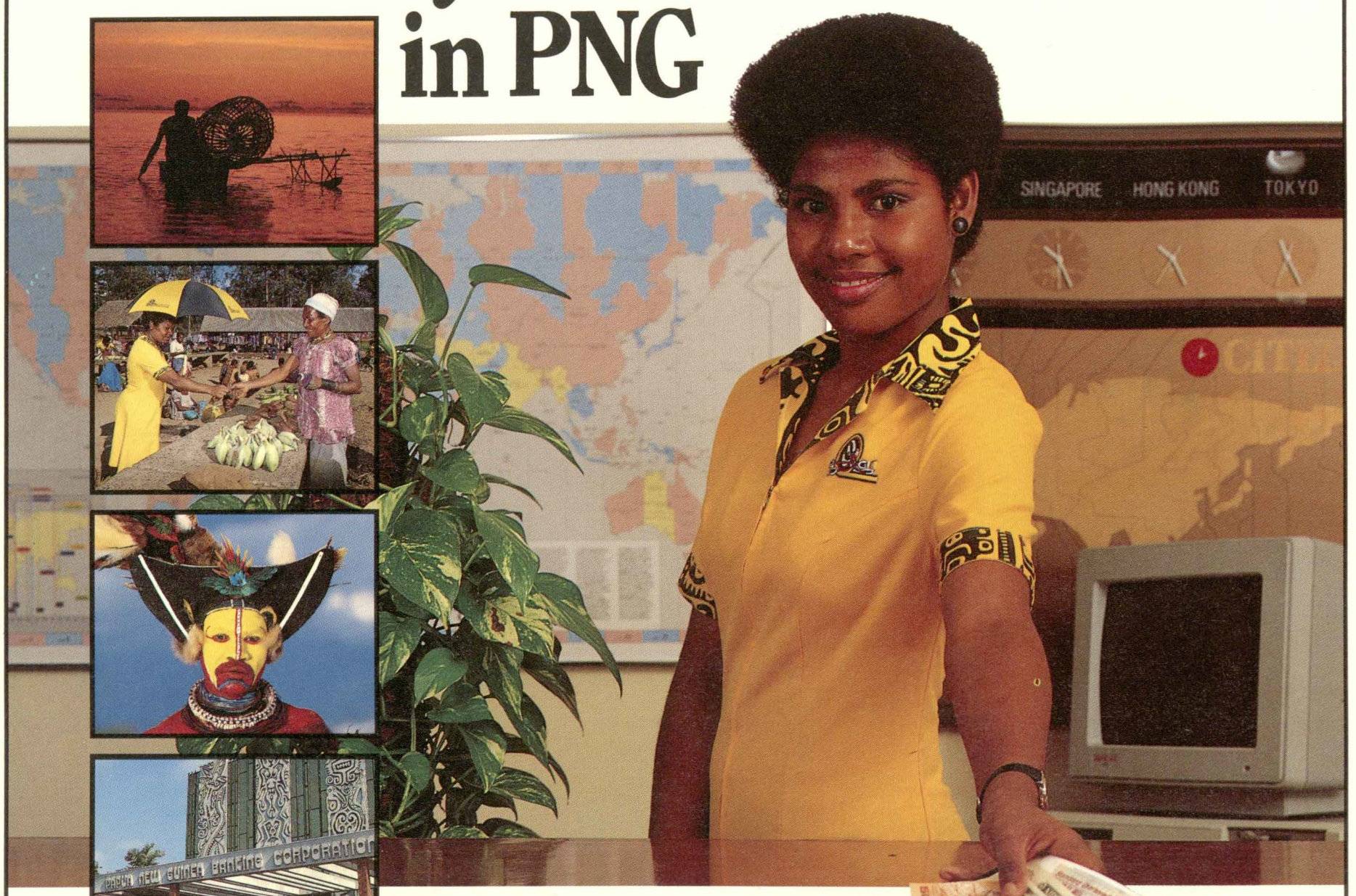

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CULTURE STORE/HOUSE

Close to the National Parliament sits Papua New Guinea's National Museum. Its interior, low lit, houses some of PNG's oldest carvings. Shields, canoe prows, beautifully shaped paddles, malangan masks, fertility figures, a collection from throughout PNG, though it is not, says Seroi Eoe, the museum director, the best in the world.

Story by
Liz Thompson
Photography by
Liz Thompson
and PNG
National Museum

Above *Yuat River mask.*

Below *Maprik village carved figure.*

Many of PNG's rarest pieces are housed in international museums and one of the National Museum's current objectives is to organise, wherever possible, their return. The process is starting to take place on a worldwide scale. Increasingly indigenous peoples are asking for the things that were taken from them years ago, a movement supported and encouraged by UNESCO.

Below *Watam Island male figure.*

Mr Eoe said the museum has various objectives and three major scientific disciplines — the natural sciences of anthropology and prehistory; modern history which looks at things like World War II relics and European contact; and social or human science, which is the strongest. The museum has about 60,000 ethnographic objects. The representation is not particularly balanced with 70 to 80 per cent originating from the East Sepik area. Since 1980, more than 700 pieces have been registered in the villages, but are not removed due to attachments or significance they continue to have for their owners. The museum however knows where they are and tries to prevent them from being smuggled out by persuasive dealers.

Mr Eoe estimates that up to 90 per cent of earlier carvings were taken out of the country or destroyed in the early days of contact. The somewhat incomprehensible reason for the burning and destruction of carvings and spirit houses was, he believes, a way of condemning the ceremonial and religious practices of the people.

"Ceremonial houses were an important institution, where ceremonies were organised and objects were stored," he said.

"Once they were destroyed everything just collapsed. As long as there were indigenous or traditional institutions available it was difficult to convert the people to a new religion. As long as they were still holding on to traditional, ritualistic objects and artefacts, they wouldn't be fully committed or converted to Christian thinking.

"That was the principal reason for the destruction of material culture. In some instances religious converts were responsible for the destruction." He believes though, that even without material culture, traditional religious thought and practices live on. It is the museum's responsibility to save, and make accessible to the Papua New Guinean public, that which is left in the country and to try and have returned as much as possible.

The PNG Government has passed legislation, the National Cultural Property Preservation Act, which stipulates that nothing made before 1960 can leave the country legally. With the growing commercial carving industry that is developing in PNG, the museum is responsible for granting export permits, allowing objects made since 1960 to

Below *Middle Sepik carved kundu drum.*

Below *Middle Sepik suspension hook in form of male figure.*

Below *Male figure from Wapo Creek, Gulf Province.*

Below *Yuat River female figure holding a bird.*

be exported. It is difficult to monitor and enforce the legislation with such a large commercial market and many objects are still being smuggled out.

One of the most immediate problems the musuem confronts is limited funds. When they want to buy old pieces there is frequently a shortage of money. "There are many objects the museum is really under obligation to buy but the money isn't there," said Mr Eoe. "In fact we owe people in the villages lots of money, somewhere in the vicinity of K10,000. There are things which we have already brought to the museum but which are only half-paid on the understanding that we'll keep the objects here on the owners' behalf. The problem begins when the owner dies and the son or daughter arrives and asks for the rest of the money."

About 95 per cent of the museum's annual K900,000 budget is taken up with recurring costs, air conditioning, electricity, staff and there is very little left for purchasing or research. A sad fact, says Mr Eoe, which inhibits the musuem from carrying out the functions for which it was set up.

While it is of great importance for the museum to retain as much of PNG's material culture as possible, the museum is also starting to recognise other important functions. The museum is an educational institution. Education not only about 'primitive' art but also about new and emerging art forms.

Below *Cult hook figure from Karawari River.*

Below *Middle Sepik suspension hook in form of female figure.*

Below *Ancestral board from Harevavo village, Gulf Province.*

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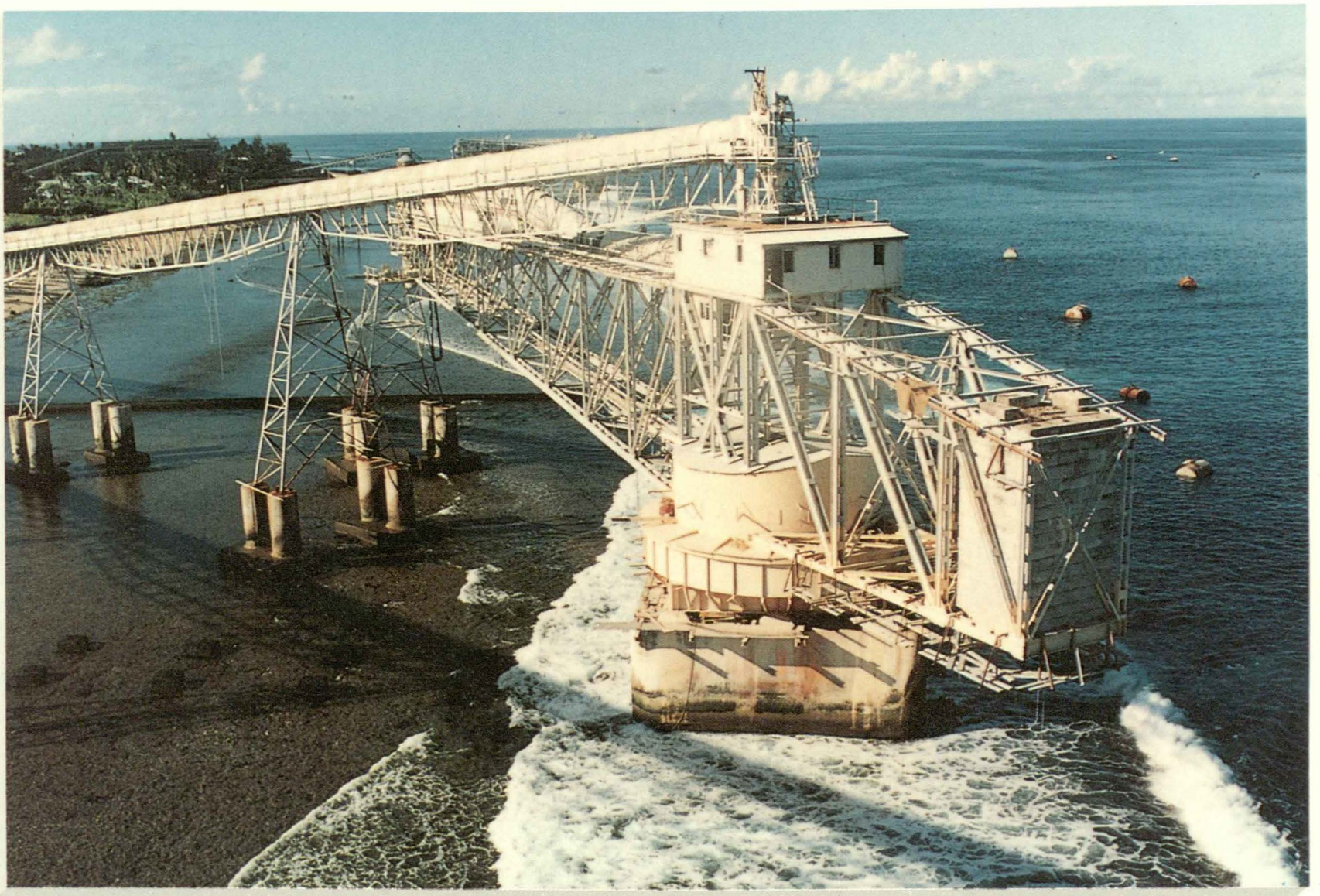

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Magic, Sorcery, Medicine

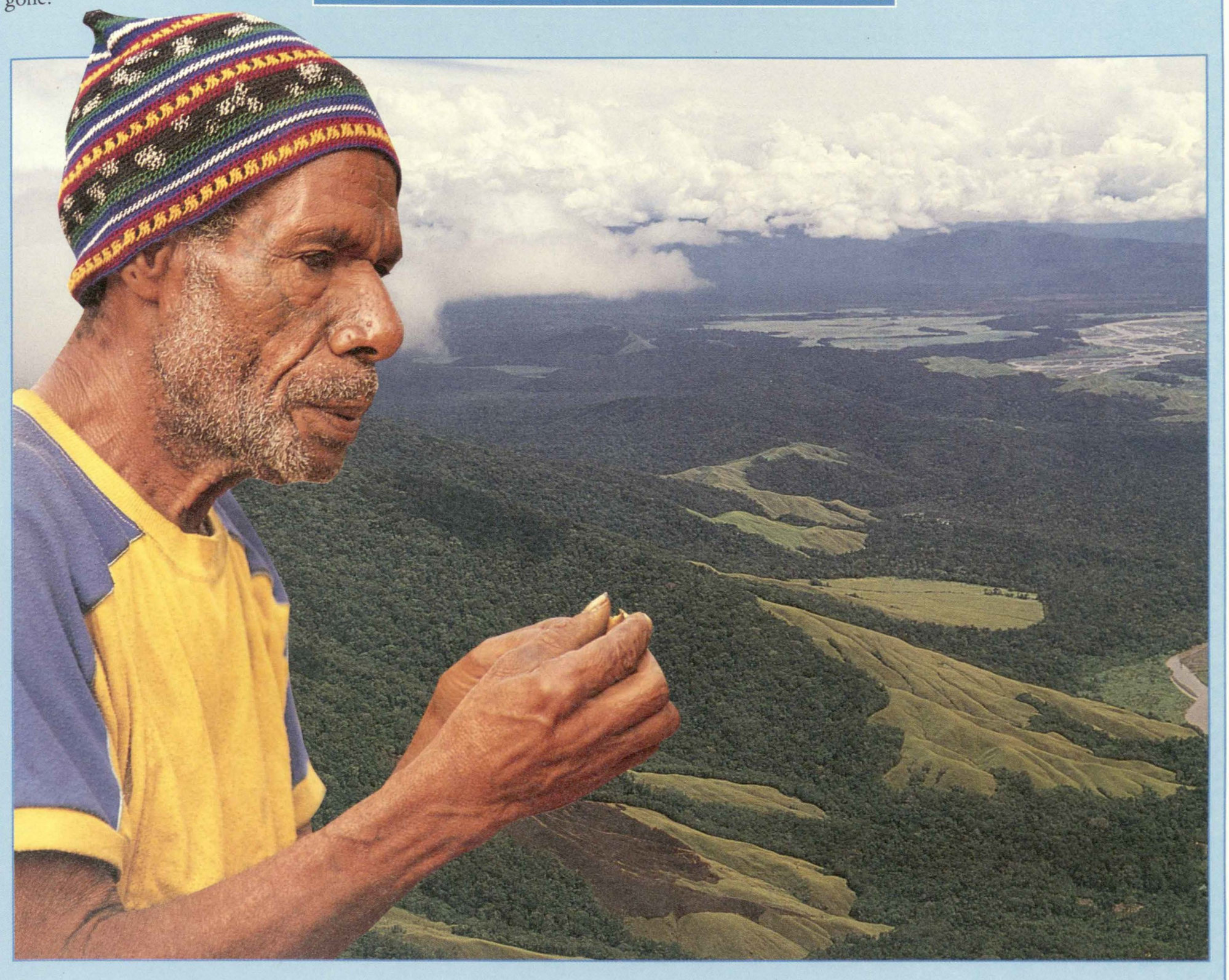
Gimiseve Woikoi is a traditional healer. In his village, 23 kilometres west of Goroka in the Papua New Guinea highlands, a patient has come to him with back pain. He collects the leaves of Laportea desumana, known locally as 'salat', spreads his hands above them and recites the appropriate words.

Smoke is then blown onto the sufferer before the leaves are used to draw the evil to the front of his body. With a sweeping motion, Gimiseve collects the spirits that caused the pain and casts them away.

The patient looks relieved. "Has the pain gone?" He smiles as if to say: "Of course it has gone!"

Sorcery and magic may be things from the Middle Ages in Western society, but in PNG belief in the power of medicinemen is still very strong. Often, serious illness is not looked upon as the result of chance infection. The questions are asked: Why this person and who has caused this illness? Sorcery, or the intervention of a malevolent spirit, is usually the answer.

Many herbal mixtures and plants are used in treatment rituals, but it is the magical rather than the pharmacological value of them that seems important. Dr Carol Jenkins, a medical anthropologist with nine years' experience in regions throughout PNG, said this



Story and photographs by Robert Simms

Above *Highlands healer, Gimiseve Woikoi, from Godonova village near Goroka.*

aspect of traditional medicine can work only if the patient believes in it. "It cannot be denied that the use of incantations or sorcery has an effect psychologically," she said. "Disease is often not perceived to be caused by naturalistic things, so the people don't look for naturalistic cures."

She added that people seek treatments that relate to what they think is the cause of the disease. "If there is a spirit cause, you appease or roust the spirit," she said. Dr Jenkins believes that the two types of medicine do not compete with each other. "With one, you're treating the 'poison' or illwill, the anxiety, worry and fear associated with illness; and with the other you're treating the germs," she said. "The systems can, and do, coexist."

Although the Government does not officially recognise traditional healers, it does not attempt to hinder their activity. Many government ministers believe that traditional medicine is part of the nation's cultural heritage. By contrast, scientific medicine is perceived to be foreign and Western.

In effect, traditional healers provide a psychiatric service to many patients. "Some PNG doctors have been known to send patients to traditional healers if the medical treatment is not working effectively, because of the patient's mental attitude or fear," said Dr Jenkins. "Clearly, the relief of fear is very important in curing disease."

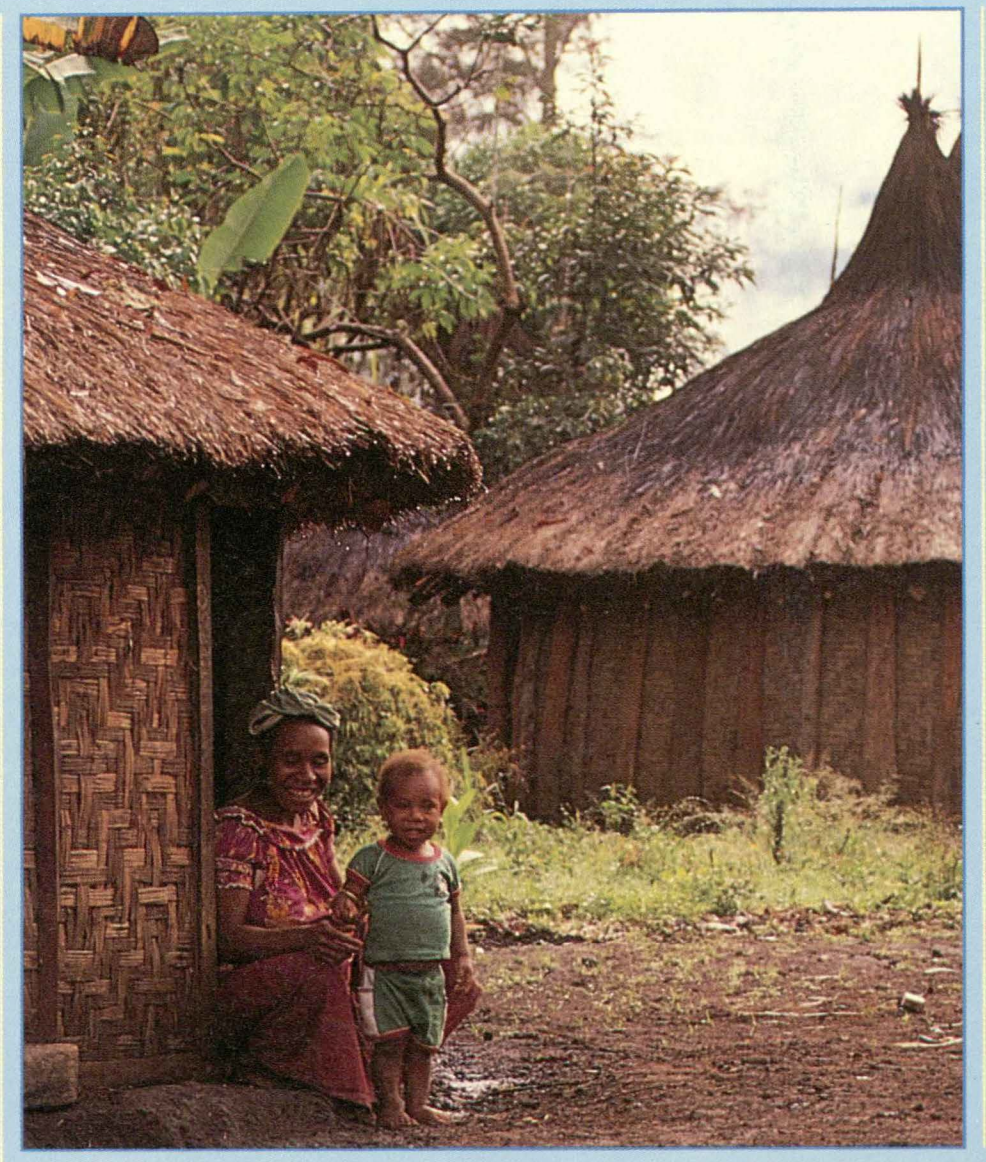
The integration of scientific medicine and traditional healing is becoming more common. Provided with a choice, the people seek the more appropriate service for their ailments. Traditional healers are often consulted first, but in the case of chronic illness, there is an increasing tendency to use modern medicine, when available.

"Papua New Guineans all over the country readily accept Western medicine because they are pragmatic," said Dr Jenkins. "They recognise what Western medicine can do for them." More often now, there is the assumption that sickness curable by Western medicine must have natural causes, so discovering 'who' has caused the illness is not necessary.

Medicinal plants and herbs are used widely for skin disorders and minor illness. For example, the new leaves of cassia alata are rubbed into the skin to cure tinea, while zingiber officinale, or wild ginger, is commonly ingested to treat malaria fever, toothache, tropical ulcers, rheumatism and numerous other ailments.

It is evident that many of these plants help in some cases, but the effect of those used in conjunction with sorcery or incantations is questionable.

At the Wau Ecological Institute (WEI) in Morobe Province, a medicinal plants project is endeavoring to prove the value of traditional cures. Reagent chemical tests indicate whether the plants contain active substances such as alka-



Above *Godonova village where Gimiseve the healer plies his craft.*
below *Patients who have successfully sought the healer's power.*

loids and steroids. If results appear promising samples are sent to the University of PNG or overseas for further testing.

Dr Jenkins believes that, apart from some anti-fungal treatments, few of the plants used in traditional medicine show much promise. "Most of the herbs and plants used by the healers are ineffective," she said. "There seems to be little point in trying to develop treatments using these plants when cheap Western alternatives are already available."

The director of the WEI, Mr Harry Sakulas, thinks there is a case for further investigation of local cures. He said that if it is possible to identify plants with therapeutic properties, their use could be promoted in the villages. "Although Western drugs are available in the towns, they are not always accessible in remote villages," he said. "If plants that have proven effect can be propagated in the villages, the health situation can be improved."

Top *Leaves of the cassia alata, used to alleviate skin complaints.* **above** *Gimiseve treats a case of severe back pain.*

To help identify medicinal plants and their uses, local healers have been showing the researchers at Wau how to apply the treatments.

"It is important to document the plants used in traditional medicine and how they are prepared before the traditional healers die and take the knowledge with them," said Mr Sakulas.

Obtaining all the information relating to the preparation and use of the plants will be difficult. "This knowledge gives the healers power," said Dr Jenkins. "They will not give the information away for fear of losing that power."

Before the introduction of Western medicine, communities had high mortality rates and low life expectancy. Since World War II, most of the country has had access to Western medicine. This has led to a dramatic drop in mortality and morbidity. The apparent lack of impact of traditional medicine on serious illness indicates that plants currently in use have little more than symptomatic benefits, according to a recent Government report.

Dr Levi Sialis, the First Assistant Secretary for Primary Health Services in PNG, said it is important to document the use of medicinal plants, but the government does not propose to divert its scarce resources into further research at this time. He said it should be left to the patients and their relatives to judge the relative merits of the two systems. "I have been approached by some traditional healers who would like official recognition," he said. "But at the moment, the government does not plan anything along that line."

Because there is no recognised body of knowledge of traditional healing, it would be extremely difficult to agree upon the criteria by which healers could be judged, he said.

The proliferation of Christian sects, which now number more than 50 in PNG, has had some impact on the belief that the ancestral spirits have an effect on the health of the living. Dr Jenkins believes Christianity does not necessarily run contrary to all the ideals and ethics of the village. "Co-operation, harmony and peace within the village has always been part of village life," she said. "The belief that illness can be caused by the power of the ancestors, however, is opposed by the churches."

Regardless of the government or religious attitudes, traditional medicine will be a part of PNG life for a long time yet.

"Nothing will stop the native medicinal culture unless so much of the forest is destroyed that they can't get the plants," said Dr Jenkins. "Even some educated people, under psychological or emotional stress during serious illness, still try traditional healing and have expressed the fear that the illness was perhaps caused by sorcery."

She concluded: "It has been only a generation since the introduction of Western medicine to much of PNG so to suggest that traditional healing would cease to be used so quickly would be absurd."

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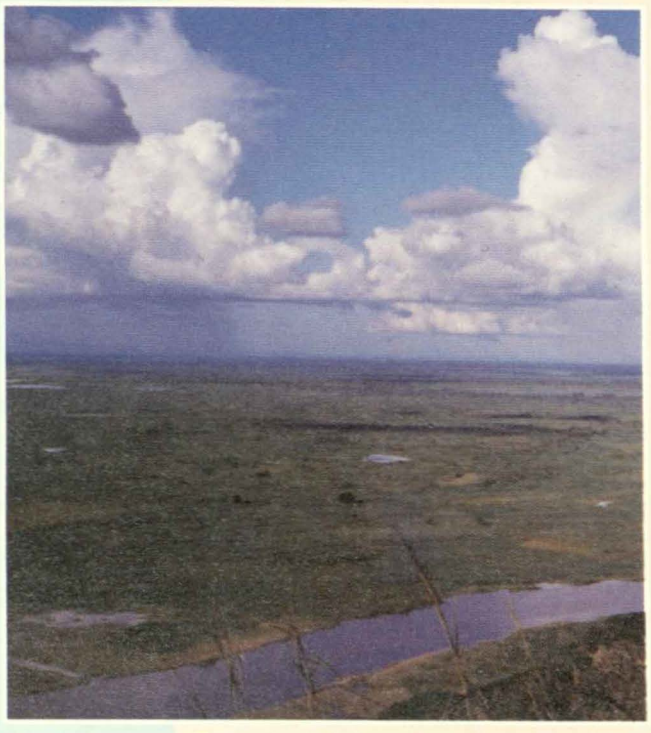
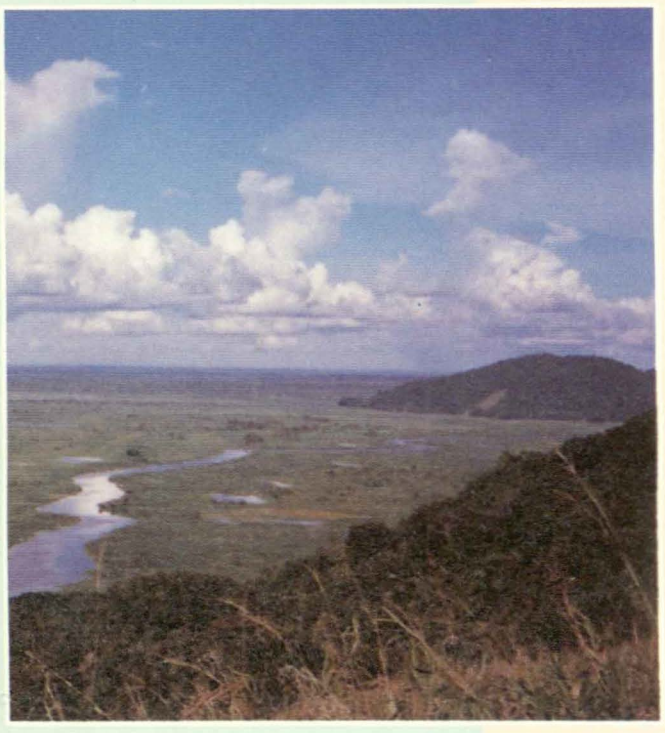
RIVER RETURN

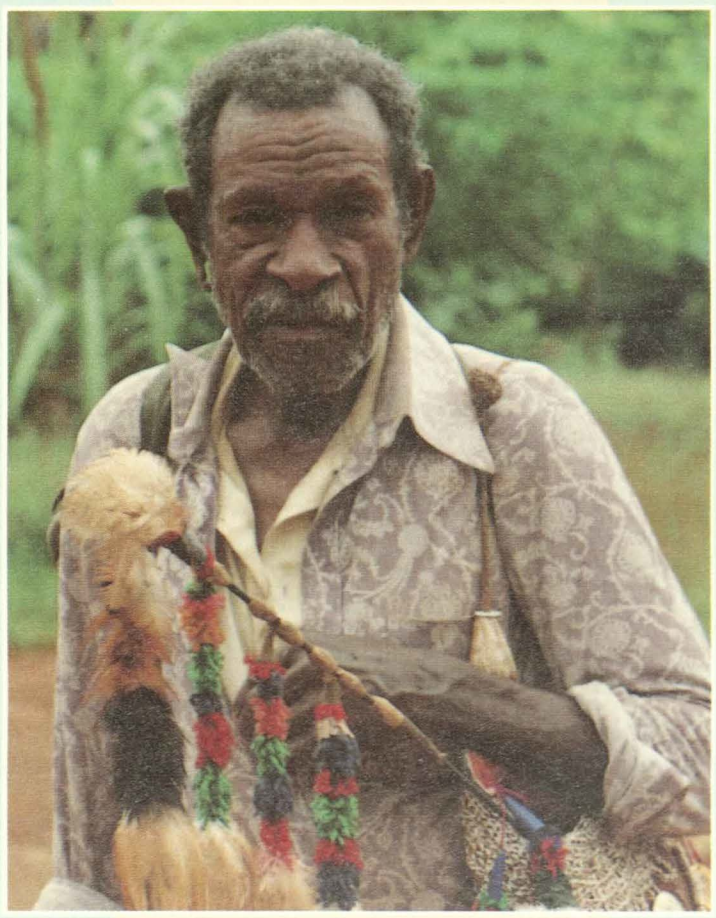
Story and photographs by Laurie Bragge





Top *Kwoma girl dressed for a ritual dance honoring ancestors.* **above** *Chambri Lakes area of the Sepik River basin.*

Right *Male initiation ceremony at Nogosop village.* **centre** *Young Kwoma woman adorned for ritual dance.* **bottom** *Tassels indicate grisly trophies taken by Kwoma elder in headhunting days.*



"Nau taim long yumi igo long haus tambaran" (It is time for us to go to the spirit house) . My friend Nauwi's whispered words were barely audible. The village women and children had departed, leaving us to our secret errand.

Between the palms, the towering haus tambaran was faintly illuminated by small fires scattered on its earthen floor. Inside this sacred place, the firelight revealed shadowy figures carved on massive posts. At that moment the ancestral spirits were as real to us as they were to our Kwoma hosts.

A man-sized object was placed before us and we watched as its bark coverings were removed to reveal the likeness. A Kwoma tribal leader called Walasaka had died last year. I had known Walasaka a decade ago. It was as if Walasaka was standing there. The likeness was incredible. Nauwi had recreated his brother's face in clay, over Walasaka's skull which now stood on wooden shoulders. Nauwi explained the beard and braids of hair were the hair of their long dead mother.

Two elders were given Walasaka's ceremonial bilums (string bags). The gifts allow Walasaka's spirit to rest easily with his old friends. With the ceremony over, Walasaka's statue was again swathed in bark to be hidden from the eyes of the village people. As we filed quietly back to the houses of our Kwoma hosts, we knew we had received an unusual honor. "The highlight of the tour," I heard Michael, our Canadian 'outsider' say.

It was good to be back on PNG's Sepik River, where I had spent 11 years as a District

Upper left *Young Kwoma woman with distinctive headdress.* **left** *Travelling by powered canoe.* **below** *carved end of a garamut drum at Bangwis village.* **bottom** *Kwoma woman with stomach scarification honoring ancestress Nokwi.*

Officer. I had returned to talk to old friends, in places off the tourist routes, about bringing outsiders to experience their world. Nine of us, including my 12-year-old son Chris, travelled north on Air Niugini, prepared to experience whatever the Sepik had to offer.

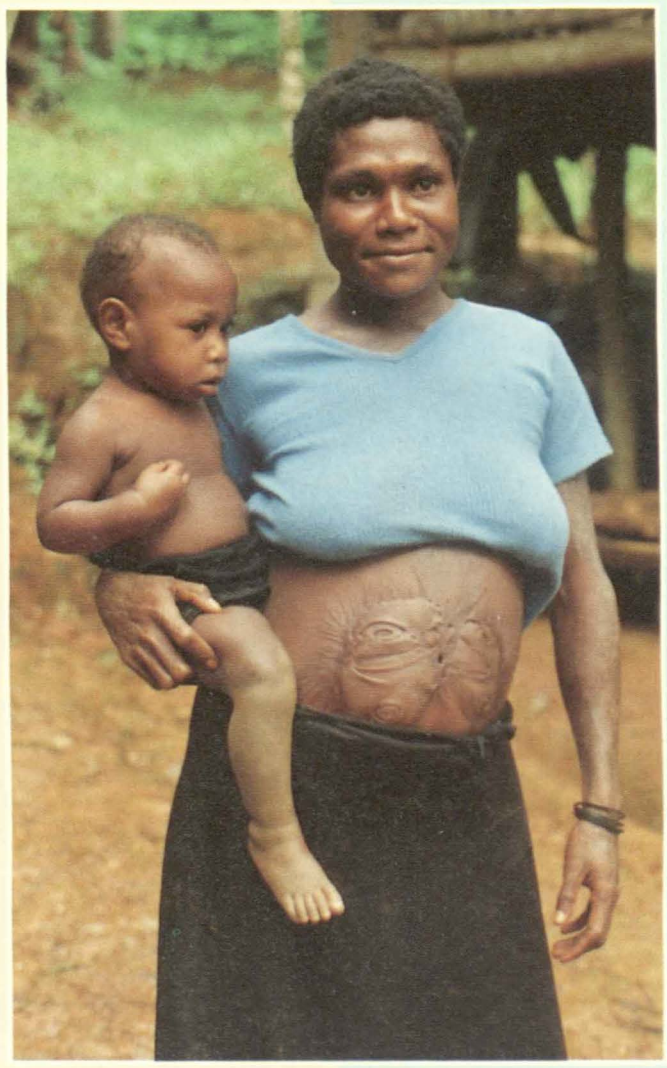
Before the ceremonies of Walasaka's gifts, I had found a beautiful statue of the ancestress Nokwi in the soil under a house. A Kwoma woman had pointed to the engravings on Nokwi's stomach, and lifted her blouse to show her own stomach scarification. What would a hospital do with such massive wounds?

Nauwi explained that Kwoma girls are 'beautified' at puberty: "If a man is attracted to the beauty scars, and he likes the girl, he marries her."

A revival of Kwoma traditional life stemmed from a conflict between mission supporters and traditionalists in the 1970s. A church was built beside the haus tambaran and the missionary rang his bell with gusto whenever a Nokwi ceremony required silence. To preserve the peace, I issued an order restraining the bellringer. Mission influence soon diminished and the church was relocated.

From the Kwoma we travelled out of the Waskuk Lagoon into the Sepik River in two 15-metre motorised canoes. The Sepik's 40-metre width of solid-looking grey water seems to slide by rather than flow. More than 95 kilometres downstream, we turned our attention from a brilliant red and blue streaked sky to the silhouetted spires of the haus tambaran at Yenchan. Willing hands caught the lines and carried our packs inside.

Yenchan's haus tambaran is different in design and art style



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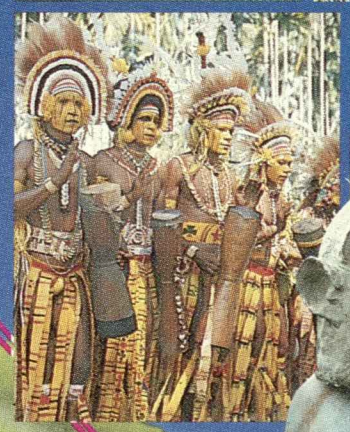

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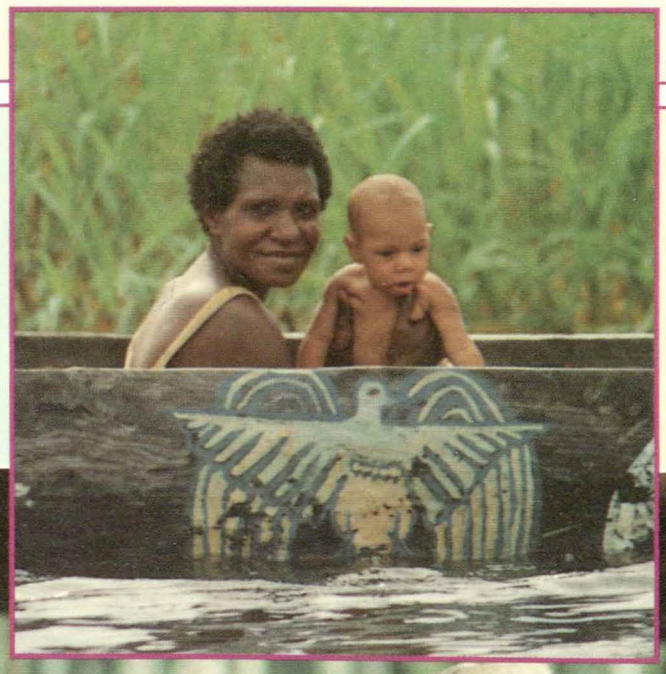
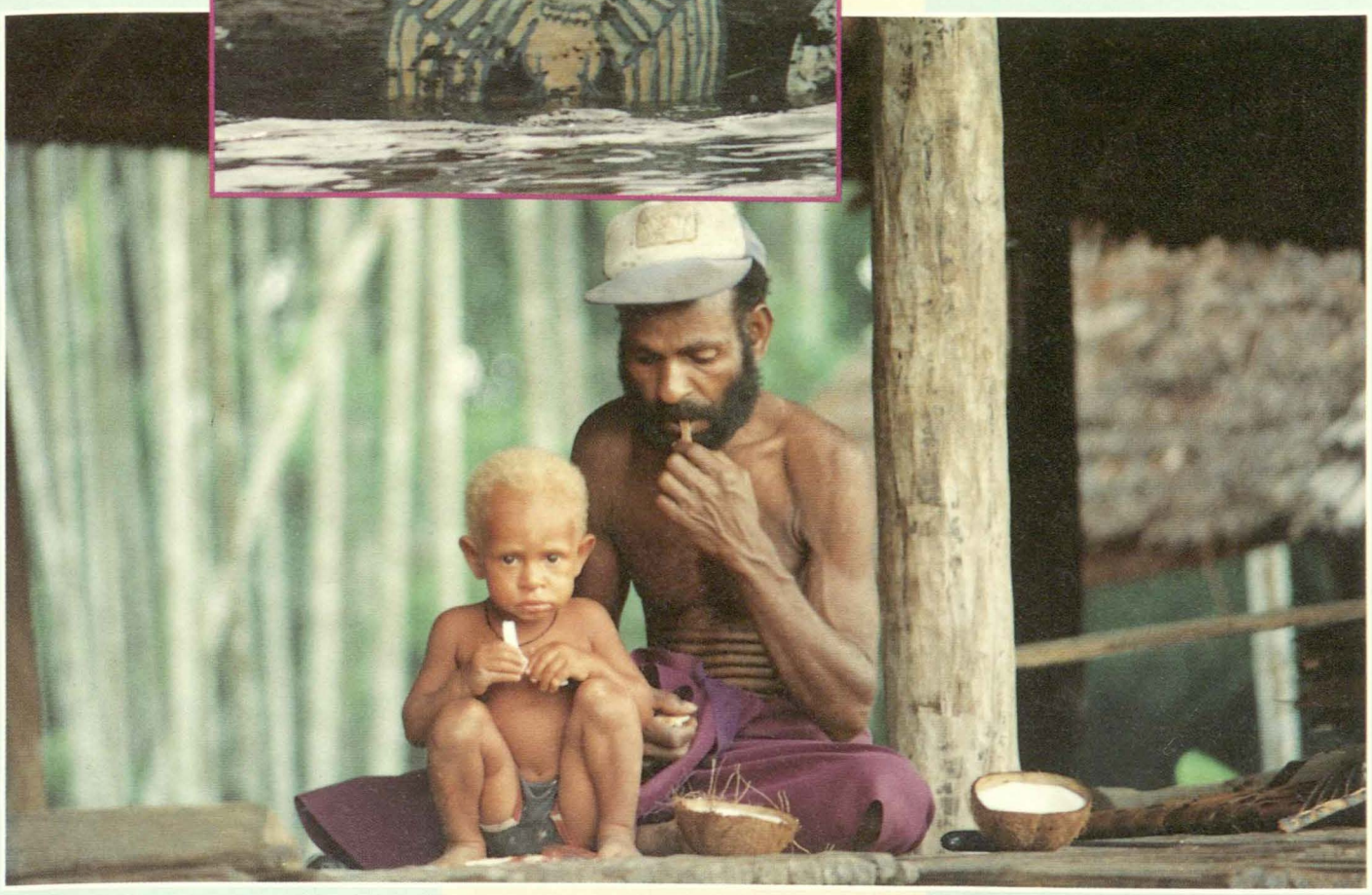
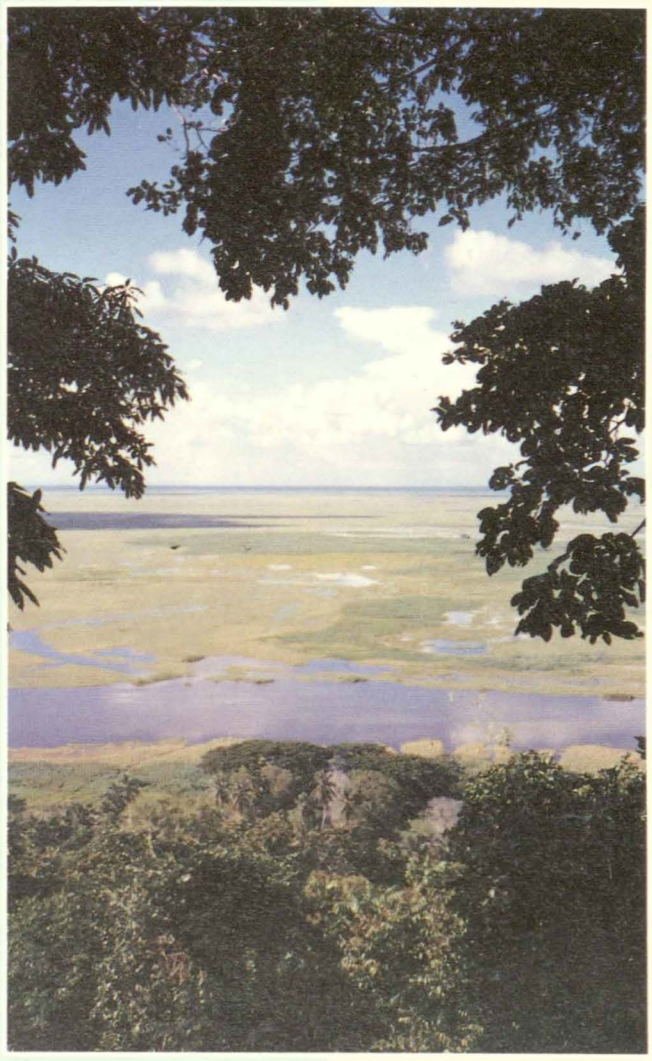




Left *Mother and child in passing canoe.* **centre** *Biwat village elder and child share a coconut.* **bottom** *Chambri Lakes scene.*



from that of the Kwoma. Yenchan carving is finer and more symmetrical than the magnificent gauntness which attracted Sir Henry Moore to Kwoma sculpture. We climbed a three-metre ladder into a giant attic and suspended our mosquito nets among the sacred masks, flutes and drums stored in the rafters. Downstairs, fires were stoked in ornate clay hearths, ready to cook our evening meal.

Early next morning our canoe nosed its way up the narrow channel towards Marap. We arrived in time to see Yenchan women packing up after a traditional exchange of fish for sago. The people of the Sepik plains have no fishing grounds, and the river people have inadequate sago stands. Trade provides the obvious answer: but it is trade with a difference. Men of the plains and the river were traditional enemies, but the plains and river women traded every third day for the food essential for the mutual survival of the enemy populations.

Given this division between men and women, what did our hosts think of female visitors? We knew they were allowed in haus tambarans where village women could not go. My introduction of Fay as a photographer was met with polite disinterest; that Annette was a nurse deserved a shrug; that Wendy was a potter met with approval (pottery is women's work) but when I explained Faith, from Guam, was the pilot of huge aeroplanes, the pidgin reply was pure male chauvinism "Em? liklik hia? Emi i liklik tumas long dispela!" ("Her? The small one? She is too small for that!")

From Tambunam we trekked northwards through wetlands, seeking the pottery village Kamangaui. The sago swamps are warm, pungent, primeval places where brilliant shafts of golden sunlight angle down between vivid green spiky fronds and rich brown sago trunks, to reflect from the seemingly black swampwater.

As we emerged from the sago into lowland forest we were rewarded with the sight of a lesser bird of paradise. It seemed to wait, making sure we had seen it, before swooping from its branch away through the trees, its brilliant yellow plumage streaming behind.

The Kamangaui response to our interest in their ornate pottery was overwhelming. We were their first tourists. A group of Koiwud people watched us with interest and finally asked us to visit Koiwud next time. At Tambanum we had been offered a Kamangaui pot for 30 kina. Here, better specimens cost 7 kina.

Brian Crick, on his second trip with me, had an eye for the occasional collector's item we saw. At Dimiri he bought a fire-blackened dish, its functional simplicity appealing to him.

Left *Chambri Lakes scene.* **below** *Freshly fired clay vessels at Aibom whose potters are renowned.* **bottom** *Typical corner post of Tambunam village house.*

Soon after, I found an exquisite narrow-necked water jar.

We went to Aibom to see the Sepik's 'Wedgewood'. Food cooked in Aibom pottery is said to have a superior flavor. I was surprised to learn that trade in the pottery had declined. In the 1970s a water weed called salvinia molesta appeared in the Sepik. By the 1980s the waterways were so blocked people could no longer reach Aibom to buy its pottery. They purchased metal saucepans instead and when salvinia-eating beetles reopened the lakes, trade did not return to former levels — saucepans seldom need replacement.

At Chambri an elder stepped forward. "Mebei," he introduced himself in pidgin. "Remember me? You jailed me for four months! You remember! You said I was too old to work and put me in the kitchen. Anything you want in Chambri, just ask Mebei." Mebei provided us with firewood, sweet potatoes and oranges.

I thought I recognised a man in the haus tambaran. "Yarapat?" He jumped as if I had hit him, then asked why I had not written. I introduced Chris who Yarapat insisted must call him 'Tumbuna' (Grandfather). When I arranged to meet the village leaders he urged me not to leave 'old' Yarapat out of any tourism plans I might have.

Days later we were back at Wewak's Sepik International Hotel enjoying the clean clothes, hot showers and cold beer. Already I was missing the open friendliness of the Sepik people and the endless gallery of their primitive art: sure signs that I soon would feel the need to return.

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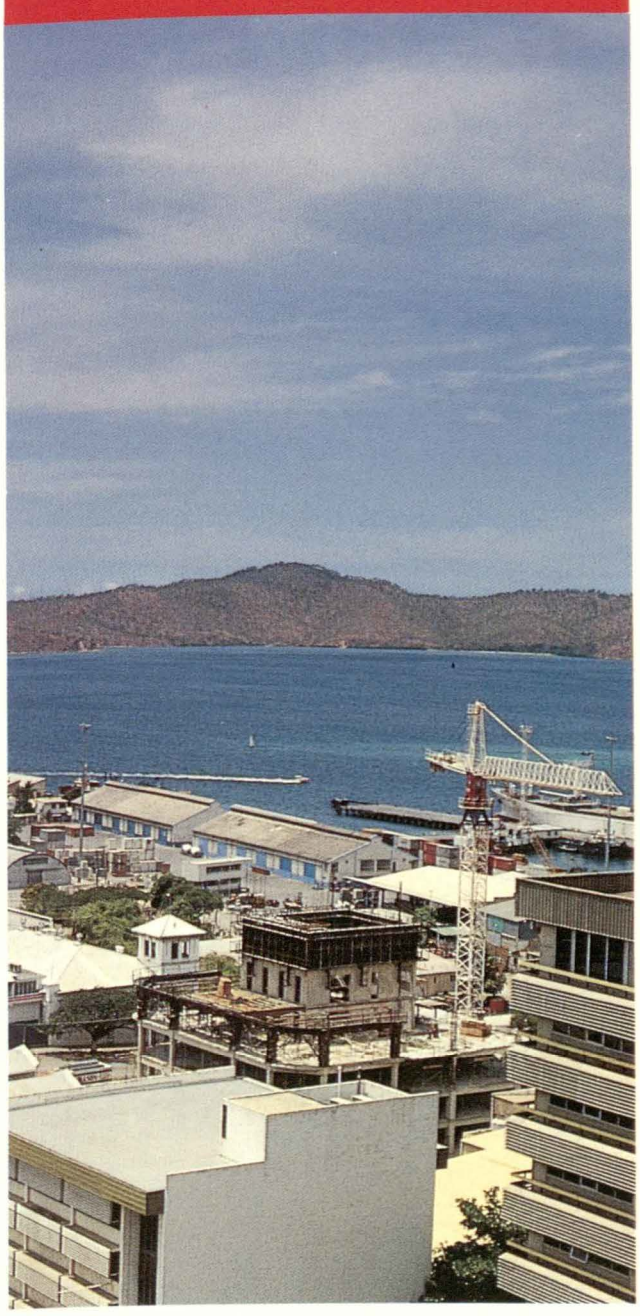

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GOROKA 721844 • MT HAGEN 521888 • WEWAK 862255 • POPONDETTA 297266
KAVIENG 942132 • KIETA 956083 • KIMBE 935155 • TABUBIL 589060
VANIMO 871254 • PORGERA 508203

ELA MOTORS

WHEELS FOR THE NATION

EM3677