

THE FACIAL TATTOOS OF ORO PROVINCE

By Don Silcock



One of the most visually intriguing things about 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 them.

Tattoos and body art in general have enjoyed a significant renaissance in western society over the last 20 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 to others.

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 BC.

Tattooing was especially prevalent in the South Pacific and the word itself is a derivative of the Polynesian/Samoan verb *tatu* - meaning to strike. And 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.



A close-up photograph of a person lying down, their face adorned with intricate black traditional paint or clay designs. The person has dark, curly hair and is wearing a patterned garment. Two hands are visible, applying a bright green substance, likely a natural dye or paint, to the person's forehead. The background is decorated with various items, including yellow corn cobs, red flowers, and a beaded necklace.

The Maoris, 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!

A person with a large afro hairstyle and face paint is lying down, surrounded by a large pile of colorful beads and shells. A hand is applying a substance from a small shell to their face. An inset shows a close-up of the face paint.



Oro Province Facial Tattoos

Facial and body tattooing are reported to have been widely practised in coastal Papua at the time of the first European contact, but why it stopped in some areas and continued in others is not very clear.

Many of these earlier tattoo patterns were said to have been quite simple, but the “women of Tufi” were known for their elaborate and intricate designs.

The tattoos are made when a girl reaches her full maturity at around 18 years of age. They are a very visible indication of her “coming of age” and that she is now ready for marriage.

The process of applying the tattoos is a long and quite painful one involving a technique that is only practised by certain women in the village who have been taught it by their mothers and grandmothers.

The completed facial tattoo can take up to two months because it is applied in sections on a daily basis, which gives previously completed areas time to heal.

During that time, the girl lives with the tattooists away from the main village, in a special hut to shield her from the males in the village - particularly the young ones - and 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...and the process is repeated until the right amount of ink penetration is achieved and the tattooist is satisfied with the result.





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The black ink used for the tattoos is made by mixing ground charcoal with water and then 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.

The actual patterns are quite specific with an overall pattern that identifies the Korafe tribe (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.



Once the tattooing and celebration is over, the girl is ready for marriage and the boy who has courted her now has to prove to her parents that he is of good character and worthy of their daughter.

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 gifts from the girl's parents in recognition of the service provided.

Once the tattooing and celebrations are over, the girl is ready for marriage and the boy who has courted her now has to prove to her parents that he is of good character and worthy of their daughter. This typically means he will make a new vegetable garden for her parents or build them a new canoe or house to demonstrate his skills as a man. It is a big test for him.

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

After the girl has married the boy, it's then her turn to be "tested" to prove her worthiness as a wife to his parents so that the "bride price" can be settled.

The concept being that evaluating the boy and girl's overall worthiness allows the parents to properly decide the right price to be paid by the boy to the girl's parents.



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