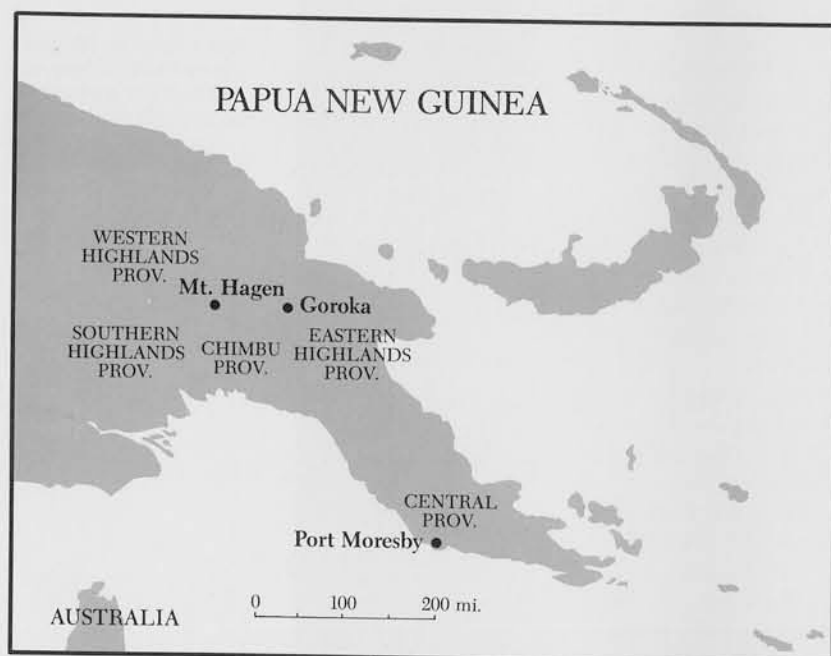


'The Highland Show'

Mount Hagen/Goroka, Papua New Guinea

Jordan M. Wright



The highland regions of Papua New Guinea were virtually unknown to outsiders until explorations during the 1930s revealed that hundreds of thousands of people were living there, speaking hundreds of languages, and subsisting largely by growing the sweet potato, which thrives at both low and high elevations. While trade objects from the coasts, even iron tools of European manufacture, reached the highlands before Europeans did, and while during World War II the Highlanders came to know something about aircraft which frequently overflew their isolated valleys, the highland interior of New Guinea was literally cut off from the rest of the world until the Australian colonial government decided to open it up in the 1940s and 1950s. Prior to the establishment of peace at that time, New Guinea Highlanders were divided into hostile factions and tribes, warfare and feuding were

constant, and travel over even moderate distances was impossible for the local people.

In the traditional cultures of the highlands, the major art forms were body decoration, costumery, singing, and dancing (the well-known sculpture of New Guinea does not come from this region). All important social events, and especially warfare and feuding, were marked by the display of lavish personal adornment of the participants. Thus it is not surprising that, when peace allowed people to travel across what had been for centuries hostile territories, occasions for meetings between groups were celebrated by the donning of elaborate costumes. The Australian Government established an annual fair, initially at Mt. Hagen, as an event to which peoples could come to learn, not only about new kinds of agriculture, but also about the colonial government which had brought peace to the highlands. Over the years, however, New Guineans have transformed the Mt. Hagen/Goroka Fair, or Highland Show as it is often called, into an extravaganza of parading, dancing, singing, and the display of costumery and body decoration. It attracts tens of thousands of New Guineans, many of whom travel for days on foot in order to attend the festivities, as well as thousands of foreign tourists. To the culturally naive outsider, highland body decoration is a stunning visual experience.

Traditionally, body adornment is both an art form and a means of conveying social messages. Some of the messages serve to identify one local group from another; others signal the social status of the wearer. However, while most highland New Guineans recognize personal decoration as an art form that is used to mark important social events, there is no standardization of symbolic meanings from one group to the next.

Papua New Guinea became an independent and sovereign nation in 1975, and the Mt. Hagen/Goroka Fair was continued as a national celebration. Even though nearly forty years of economic development and modernization have transformed much of the highland landscape, many peoples still value their aesthetic traditions of body decoration and are eager to display them at this annual celebration.

These photographs were taken in August 1982 in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Most of them are of participants in the Mt. Hagen/Goroka Fair (Figs. 1-10); three, however, were taken at a wedding in a village close to the town of Goroka (Figs. 11-13). It is hoped to arrange an exhibition of these and other photographs at The University Museum in the near future.

Eastern Highlands Province

1
Woman with part European and part traditional costume.

2
Men and women dressed as if celebrating an initiation.





3
Men in masks and makeup
for war.

Central Province

4
Man wearing a bird-of-
paradise headdress and a
fur collar.



Western Highlands Province

5
Headdress of feathers,
shells, insects, and possum
fur.

6
An initiation dance.





Southern Highlands Province

7
Two persons in foreground dressed for mourning.

Chimbu Province

8
Two kinds of feather headdress.



9
Women in the decorations for a fertility dance.

10
Man dressed as an initiate for maturation rites.





11, 12, 13
Scenes at a wedding in
Mingende Village,
Chimbu Province.

The costumes and body
decorations show the
traditional way in which
adornment marks impor-
tant social events. It is this
tradition that has been
carried over and adapted
for the Mt. Hagen/Goroka
Fair.

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Jordan M. Wright received
a doctorate in law from
Vanderbilt University in
1982. That same year he
traveled to New Guinea on
a photographic assignment
for the Metropolitan
Museum of Art; while
there he visited several
villages in the Highlands
and Sepik Regions of
Papua New Guinea and
Balin Valley of Irian Jaya.
His photographs from that
trip were exhibited in 1983
by Marian Locks Gallery
in Philadelphia; they will
be on display at the Israel
Museum in Jerusalem in
1984, and some will ap-
pear in *Life Magazine*.
Wright has also photo-
graphed Alaska and the
southern United States,
and has won awards in a
number of local photo-
graphic contests.