

XXXX Wrapping in Headdress Tattoos in Polynesia Oxford Studies in
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See also SANTA CRUZ ISLANDS; SOLOMON ISLANDS, §2; TORRES STRAIT ISLANDS.

(ii) *Melanesia*. The cultures of Melanesia excel in the adornment of the human body, with an extraordinarily diverse repertory, including vibrant paints, plants and feathers; gleaming animal teeth, tusks and shells; cicatrization marks, tattoo, wigs and jewellery. The focus here is on four broad types of decoration, although, given that such types are more often than not worn simultaneously, it is not possible to discuss them completely separately.

(a) *Shell ornaments*. Decoration of the body with shell ornaments is common throughout Melanesia. The best known are the *vaygu'a* valuables that are traded around a ring of islands in the Massim area of Papua New Guinea in an exchange network known as the Kula (Malinowski, 1922). Kula necklaces (*soulava*), sometimes between 2 and 5 m long, are made of small, red, disc-shaped shells (*Spondylus*), often interspersed with white cowrie shells and black banana seeds. White shell pendants are attached. Armbands (*mwali*), traded in the opposite direction, are cut and polished from the middle sections of large, white shells (*Conus*). These Kula valuables acquire personal names and unique histories. The red and white colours are also sexually evocative (see Weiner, 1976). White symbolizes the freshness and purity of infants, red signifies desire and sensuality, while black striations indicate impurity and illness. Shell decorations often have anthropomorphic aspects. Armbands, for example, had small grass skirts attached (Beier, 1978), while in one area the shell pendants of ceremonial necklaces are 'heads' whose 'voices' are the sounds of dangling strands of smaller shells (Battaglia, 1983).

Throughout the region the aesthetic evaluation of Kula ornaments and shell decorations focuses on such qualities as size, colour, striations, curvature, smaller shell attachments, length, age and fineness of grinding (Campbell, 1983). If worn at dances, shells should also emit a pleasant sound. In Highland New Guinea, brightness is the primary aesthetic aspect of shell decorations (Strathern and Strathern, 1971). A large golden pearl shell, shaped like a crescent moon, often adorns the neck or the otherwise naked, greased chest of men and women, its effect highlighted by a black or red painted background. The lustre of these shells 'attracts' other shells and thus evokes wealth and successful exchange relationships.

In general, Melanesian shell ornaments beautify the body through their association with wealth, sexual desire, reproduction and bodily substances (see Clark, 1991). Other forms of shell decoration include circular forehead ornaments, slender earrings, round shells attached to pierced septa that cover the mouth and chin, and various types of bracelets, anklets, necklaces and chest ornaments, including huge bailer shells that nearly cover the entire upper torso. Shell ornaments have varying constructions, for example single shells attached to rattan, strands of small shells and seeds, as well as geometrical arrangements and patterns representing animal and sometimes human faces.

(b) *Headdresses*. Many Highland New Guinea peoples adorn themselves with brightly coloured paints, wigs and ornate feather headdresses. Red, blue, black, yellow and striped plumes are arranged in patterns according to the wearer's status, the event (typically large-scale prestige exchanges of pigs) and the social relationships among the participants. Male dancers among the Wahgi wear a headband of iridescent green beetles that supports a row of short red feathers (O'Hanlon, 1989). Yellow bird of paradise plumes extend from either side of the dancer's head, protruding beyond his shoulders, while even longer black plumes flow majestically above him (see PAPUA NEW GUINEA, §I, 3, and fig. 8). Wahgi women have similar headdresses, only smaller. Both men and women wear woven armbands stuffed with green leaves, and a yellow marsupial pelt adorns the chest.

In the Mount Hagen area of Papua New Guinea, male dancers wear black, shoulder-wide, semicircular wigs that curve over their heads. In the centre of the wigs are white shells and leaves. Atop them, supported by a bamboo trellis, are visually stunning bands of bright red, white and blue feathers, with additional orange and other coloured plumes projecting outwards. The men also wear nose ornaments, usually round shells, and a row of small bamboo tubes draped down their chest; the latter being tallies of successful pig and shell exchanges (Strathern and Strathern, 1971). The expansive feather decorations and swaying plumes combine with the lustrous shells visually to expand the body and symbolically to exaggerate the size and prosperity of the wearers and their clans.

(c) *Body painting and scarification*. In the Highlands male body paints tend to emphasize darkness, while female body art is brightly coloured. Women's faces may be covered with red paint; alternatively they may have red geometric patterns, triangles and suchlike, on their cheeks. Inside these may be blue, white, yellow and black dots and hatching. Men paint thin red, white and blue bands under the eyes and across the face. On women, red symbolizes blood; white face paints, favoured by male dancers, signify semen, pig-fat and clan continuity.

In the middle Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea body decoration either transforms the wearer into a totemic being or associates him with mystical powers. For warfare, Iatmul men adorn their faces and torsos with emblems of ritual aggression. Often these motifs represent totemic birds and animals known for stealth and fierceness. A thick swath of black paint down the face is a 'boar's tusk' that empowers the warrior with courage and ferocity. A face painted white with black outlines around the eyes and down the nose resembles a spirit. In another warrior pattern, the shoulders are painted red, the legs and torso black, and a white band runs down the chest and arms, curling into tusk shapes. Middle Sepik men also proudly display raised initiation scars. Rows of welts representing the scales of ancestral crocodiles wind over the shoulders and down the back; sometimes the upper thighs are also marked. Circular scars coil around the nipple. Other scars evoke the gills of ancestral fish in bands of semicircles,

zigzags and fish-skeleton patterns. These scars refer to senior spirits and thus identify men with them.

The Iatmul 'fine-lined paint' pattern (*tshugukepma*) is particularly striking. It is worn during a ceremony that celebrates the creation of the cosmos. Costumed men assume the persona of male ancestor heroes, maternal ancestresses and the female spirits of floating islands. Accompanied by totemic chanting and drumming, these mystical beings dance and joust for an audience of women and children. The dancers' faces are painted inside the men's cult house with red, white, yellow and black designs. An initial wash of red ochre, signifying menstrual blood, is overlain with finely drawn swirling patterns in white paint, symbolizing semen. Men who impersonate male ancestors have black paint around their eyes, evoking mystical power. Yellow paint, associated with femininity, adorns the eyes of those who impersonate maternal ancestresses. These latter dancers also wear shell ornaments, coconut-shell breasts, a multicoloured grass skirt, floral armbands and a woman's woven hood decorated with leaves, feathers and orange malay apples (see fig. 7). There are several stylistic variations in the painting around the eyes, each named after a bird. In one pattern, a black 3-pointed star surrounds each eye, and a 'tail' curls towards the ears. Floral motifs may also be painted around the eyes and on the cheeks.



7. Iatmul youth adorned as ancestress for Tshugukepma ritual, Tambunum village, Eastern Iatmul, Sepik River, Papua New Guinea; from a photograph by Eric Kline Silverman, 1990

(d) *Tattoo*. In the Papuan Gulf women's faces, torsos and legs are tattooed with intricate geometric and curvilinear designs, for example square zigzag patterns that represent 'tears'. In the eastern Solomon Islands the youth of both sexes were given ornate but unpigmented facial tattoos in two sections. In the middle of the forehead was a series of diamond shapes in a symmetrical square pattern. On either side of the face were rectangles with internal geometric hatching. These linear tattoos progressed up the side of the face, in steps, receding into the hairline. Each tattoo artist had a unique style and repertory.

In the Solomon Islands pigmented tattoos were often the sole prerogative of women, except for male ritual specialists, who were given small fish tattoos on either side of the nose. On the torso pigmented tattoos enhanced feminine beauty and commemorated important events in the lives of male kin. They were extraordinarily complex, almost defying verbal description: rectangles framing diamonds and zigzags adorned the shoulders and belly, sometimes with triangles; lines, zigzags and various bands covered the breasts; diamond patterns, flanked by long rows of zigzags, ran down the legs; and the area between the navel and the breasts was also decorated with vertical bands in a variety of geometric forms.

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