

The ‘moss men’ of Papua New Guinea

Each year, Goroka, capital of the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG), hosts a splendid cultural event over the PNG Independence weekend in September. Hundreds of singing (cultural) groups dressed in their bilas (national costume) assemble from all over the country. Bodies are painted in local clay from white through grey to black, brown and orange to bright red. The use of diesel oil to stain bodies a glowing black is a modern addition. Costumes are made from local materials: bark cloth ‘skirts’ and capes, feathers (especially those of the spectacular and endangered birds of paradise), cuscus (an endemic

Deborah Jordan, a VSO volunteer, University of Goroka, describes a charming example of ethnobotany in Papua New Guinea.



possum) fur and ornamental shells. Local plants are much in evidence, woven into necklaces and sashes, with splendid ‘bustles’ of leaves covering naked bottoms. Bilums (traditional knitted bags used for everything from vegetables to babies) often provide a colourful touch of modesty.

Highlanders and islanders are always looking for new ways to impress both other singing groups and the smattering of tourists who visit the Goroka show each year. One group, from Jiwaka, a new province, has taken the use of forest products to a new dimension. They clothe themselves completely in moss, which is abundant in the local rainforests. Moss has always been used as a traditional decoration, principally for head dresses and for facial decoration. It is possible that the complete ‘moss suits’ were originally used for visits to the haus tambaran (spirit house) as a representation of forest spirits. However, the modern custom seems to have a more commercial edge and is certainly a big attraction at the show – although not principally for bryologists!

