Skull Art in Papua New Guinea.
28 minutes, VHS, color, 2000. Film-maker Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, Ogbuide Films, San Antonio, TX. Distributed by University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 2000 Center Street, 4th Floor, Berkeley, CA 94904; phone (510) 642-1494; <http://ucmedia.berkeley.edu>
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Anthropologist Sabine Jell-Bahlsen’s Skull Art in Papua New Guinea, a short documentary depicting the production of a skull portrait by a PNG artist, has been honored by three academic organizations (the Society for Visual Anthropology, the American Anthropological Association, and the Association for Asian Studies). Surprisingly, given these accolades, it has a notable shortcoming: viewers are not given adequate contextual information to evaluate the social and cultural significance of what is being filmed. Certainly, the subject matter—observing an Iatmul elder from the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea model a traditional skull portrait in a contemporary setting—is a provocative reflection of how ideas and practices of the traditional past still color contemporary art forms and behavior. But the video does not probe why skull art, traditionally associated with headhunting, continues to be practiced in Papua New Guinea today.

In linking traditional Sepik skull portraiture to contemporary practices, the video utilizes archival photos, scans of Sepik spirit houses and sacred stones, and extensive filming of Iatmul elder Adam Kone at work in Lae. Although the artist is heard speaking in Melanesian pidgin and singing in his local language, no captions are provided. Instead, an unseen narrator provides the authoritative narrative. Given current concerns with the artist’s gaze or voice, an opportunity was missed to hear Kone speak about his work directly.

The film opens with an image of a Sepik skull portrait while the narrator describes how these modeled skulls were traditionally linked to headhunting and values of masculine aggressiveness embodied in the prowess of local leaders and enemy warriors. For the Iatmul, skull portraits were therefore efficacious commemorative objects stored for ritual use in male spirit houses. To suggest these associations, the camera scans a Sepik village spirit house and two stones where heads were once severed from headhunting victims. The viewer also learns that headhunting was banned in the 1920s and punishment for infractions remains in contemporary PNG law.
Following this historical context, the film records how Kone constructs a skull portrait over three days. Initially, he is seen adorned in traditional shell ornaments as he prepares the clay by mixing together small styrofoam pieces, gasoline, and soil into a bowl. Overriding the artist’s voice, the narrator describes why Kone is here and what he is doing.

As the viewer learns, Kone is visiting a friend in Lae when he notices that this person owns a badly decorated skull purchased from a trader. As an Iatmul elder whose people continue to honor skull portraits, the artist decides he will model a new face and head over the old skull base. Fearful, however, that this may bring reprisals because of lingering associations with headhunting, Kone decides to work inside his unidentified friend’s kitchen—a large room decorated with Asmat shields and other Melanesian artifacts. Film end credits suggest that the location is somewhere at the University of Technology at Lae, but this is never specified.

During filming, Kone displays authoritative familiarity with every aspect of making skull art. He molds and paints the skull with aesthetic attention, and his use of traditional paraphernalia and incantations suggest that he is “a knowledgeable practitioner” of Iatmul skull art and its rituals. While preparing the clay, he wears a traditional nose ornament and headband to signify the procedure’s importance; in painting motifs on the skull he chants repetitively—although the purpose of the chanting is never identified for the viewer; and at other times while the artist is working, out-of-sight garamut drums and flutes are heard playing. Finally, when the portrait is completed, the artist dances with it on a high wicker wand imitating the exhibition of admired portrait skulls at traditional mortuary ceremonies. To establish this connection, the viewer is shown a now famous photograph of a woman’s portrait skull, originally published in 1935 by Gregory Bateson in Naven. However, stylistic differences observed between the two molded skulls are not the subject of narrative commentary and so pass unexplained.

Given the ambiguities of the creative context in which Kone’s skull portrait is entangled, how might this video aid classroom teaching? Art historians and anthropologists interested in having students evaluate aesthetic processes, including the use of new materials and techniques, will find this video valuable. Furthermore, the contextual problems of the video might be usefully framed to stimulate discussion about cultural continuities,

Kau Faito’o is a descriptive ethnographic film depicting a variety of healers (kau faito’o), and healing methods (faifo‘o fakatonga) as practiced at the turn of the millennium in Tonga. Viewers get a clear sense of Tongan culture as well as insights about specialists in birth, fertility and infancy, massage and bonesetting, and medical plant knowledge. What makes this film a little different is the production crew, which includes Tongans doing writing, narration, and research, under the sympathetic direction of Melinda Ostraff. Filmed entirely in Tonga, the production values are very good. Clear sound quality, good lighting, and visuals are augmented with clean editing, eloquent narration, and subtitles providing adequate translations without distracting from the events occurring on the screen. The film is engaging and enjoyable to watch.

The scene opens at the blowholes of Tongatapu, with narrator Loa Niumeitolu Saafi describing the story of Maui who, with his magical hook and great strength, fished the islands of Tonga up from the bottom of the sea before the first Tongans arrived some 3,500 years ago. Of her people she says: “Tongans are a proud people with familial bonds to the land. We believe that through loyalty to kinship and the mercy of God we will continue to retain and own our sovereignty. Our independence has helped us maintain and nurture sacred practices.” The opening description of Tonga as a place with a turbulent history but also protective cultural attributes offers the standardized image of Tonga that was cultivated and honed during the long twentieth-century reign of Queen Sālote. Social practices grounded in Tongan notions of kinship and respect for elders and the “old ways” enabled the small nation to survive challenges ranging from ocean voyaging, battles between chiefly factions, and the arrival of trade ships and Christian missionaries in the seventeenth century, to exposure to outside commerce and rapid monetization in the twentieth century. Images of people reef fishing, beating barkcloth, and making plant medicines are contrasted with scenes of Tongan soldiers on parade, traffic in the capital, and rap music on car radios. The theme of traditional
Papua New Guinea is renowned for ceremonial occasions at which hundreds of pigs or other valuables are distributed to guests. Competitive feasting ("fighting with food") between big men and chiefs features oratory, dancing, singing, drumming, and feasting that go on for days, along with the payment of bride-prices and other exchanges. Special drinks were rarely part of such ceremonies in the past, but now beer and alcohol are often part of major exchanges.

Inside were things like painted wood from local plant colors, statues of those of ancestral and historical importance and masks of all sorts. Tribal human overmodeled skull Tolai people Papua New Guinea, New Britain late 19th– early 20th century. Similar mask the MET Accession Number:1978.412.758 The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1960.

Ancestral Memory. Papua New Guinea occupies the eastern half of the rugged tropical island of New Guinea (which it shares with the Indonesian territory of Irian Jaya) as well as numerous smaller islands and atolls in the Pacific. The central part of the island rises into a wide ridge of mountains known as the Highlands, a territory that is so densely forested and topographically forbidding that the island’s local peoples remained isolated from each other for millennia. The smaller island groups of Papua New Guinea include the Bismarck Archipelago, New Britain, New Ireland and the North Solomons. Some of these i