

Skull Art in Papua New Guinea.

28 minutes, VHS, color, 2000. Filmmaker 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>> Sale US\$175.00, rental US\$50.00.

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.

Instead, the primary interest of this film is on the formal aspects of creating a contemporary skull portrait. This aesthetic focus may explain why artists and art historians have recommended the film, because it engages their concerns with the art object and

creative processes. But most anthropologists who study art also have a broader interest in evaluating the sociocultural, political, and historical contexts in which art objects are embedded. In viewing this intriguing video, I kept returning to one question: if skull art was integral to traditional headhunting practices, what are the contexts that continue to give it agency in contemporary PNG society?

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 styro-foam 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.

Given the artist's professed fear and need for secrecy, his willingness to be filmed seems oddly paradoxical and, as noted, the context of creativity surrounding the production of the skull portrait is obscured. For example, is the creation of this skull portrait a one-time, spontaneous event, or has Kone created other skull art in other contexts? The latter is possible, as the viewer is informed that the Iatmul continue to revere skull portraits and that skull art is still practiced. I know that twenty years ago Iatmul carvers were making wooden heads that resembled skull portraits, but did they also continue to secretly mold skulls

into likenesses of important deceased people?

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,

dynamics of cultural identity, and, in a Pacific context, debates about contested issues of authenticity. This said, the film remains puzzlingly thin with regard to ethnographic information.

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Kau Faito'o: Traditional Healers of Tonga. 27 minutes, VHS, color, 2001. Directed by Melinda Ostraff; produced by Melinda Ostraff, Joseph Ostraff, Brian Wilcox, and Wendy Wilcox, with research assistance from Amelia Niumeitolu and Ashley Knudsen; written by Michael Van Wagener, Melinda Ostraff, Joseph Ostraff, and Loa Niumeitolu Saafi; English narration by Loa Niumeitolu Saafi, with English subtitles for Tongan interviews. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, Watertown, MA. <<http://www.der.org/films/kaufaito-healers.html>> Sale US\$145.00, rental US\$50.00.

Kau Faito'o is a descriptive ethnographic film depicting a variety of healers (*kau faito'o*), and healing methods (*faito'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 light-

ing, 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