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Creative Creatures: Between Art and Anthropology

A true photograph need not be explained, nor can be contained in words.

- Ansel Adams

Abstract

The visual capture of the world has been an integral part of the formation of ethnology and cultural anthropology since the beginning. It meant not only a source of knowledge of the local community, but especially of the time at which it was created. Sometimes photographs were taken accidentally during research trips as more or less documentary material, which were only superficially analysed and served to visually confirm the investigated state, or were a targeted photo documentation of disappearing phenomena, objects of material culture, ceremonies or genius loci of the researched area. At other times, photographs were created as a result of purposeful research and documentation of selected phenomena. The result of this is an interpretive openness and an effort to find and establish new analytical and interpretive processes that would be able to convey anthropological knowledge more effectively. Is art, or in our specific case artistic photography, usable for research or for interpretation of cultural

or anthropological phenomena?

We try to find an answer to this question by analysing the collection of photographs of the Creative Creatures project (subtitled Last Survivors) from Papua New Guinea, by art photographer Martin Machaj. We analyse not only its artistic rendering but also the ethnological, anthropological content and message of the work of art.

Key words

Analysis. Art. Papua New Guinea. Photographs. Visual Anthropology.

Introduction

Content text analysis, whether quantitative, qualitative or mixed, is today a traditional technique used in text analysis, as evidenced by a number of methodological studies. The analysis, in which the image figures as a research object, is a relatively marginal approach, and as a formal tool of social research rather overlooked, but still progressively developing (Ovský, 2020, 2023). Proof of this is, for example, the work of Christopher Morton (2020), in which he deals with the photographic material of the famous English anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, but also many other studies (Morton & Edwards, 2010; Banks & Morphy, 1997; Hockings, 2003).

This study is based on the assumption that an image is a surface that carries a certain meaning, and as such can be deciphered and analysed, similar to language. The image can be examined in the same way as the textual material; they can also be compared with each other. We look at the selected collection of photographs from two aspects, the first of which is content analysis, examining the thematic areas that Machaj dealt with in his work. The second aspect is the analysis of the image, specifically photos taken during the research

that he completed in the field.¹ In doing so, we start from the theoretical background of several anthropological directions, namely visual anthropology, ethnographic or anthropological photography, anthropology of the image and anthropology of the body.

Visual anthropology developed from the study of ethnographic photography and film, but since the end of the 1990s, it has also drawn from the field of visual culture, which includes a wide range of cultural phenomena, such as fashion or decorating and beautifying the human body. It deals both with the interpretation of different cultures through visual means of expression and with the interpretation of the visual components of culture. Contemporary visual anthropology thus deals with literally everything that is intended for the human eye, as well as how people look at everyday reality (Soukup, 2010; Murgaš et al., 2023).

The ground-breaking and now classic work *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* by the leading German art historian Hans Belting (2021), greatly influenced our thinking about the way we look at the analysis of art and photography. The author inspires us with the way he provocatively describes what the paintings mean and how

they work. Its importance lies not only in the ability to ask questions about the depicted anthropological phenomena but the way it sees and describes the fundamental social changes that virtual images bring to our world.

The ontological plane of the image, which should provide an answer to the question: "What does the examined image depict?" has long been considered the basic pillar of the theory of visual anthropology, as well as of all image studies. At first glance, this is a trivial question, but after a deeper examination, it does not yield a unified answer. On the contrary, visual anthropology provides several possible alternatives that appear appropriate in certain chosen contexts. But how to choose one correct option from the enormous number of alternatives that are allowed, even demanded, in the current academic controversy? Although the ontology of the visual image seems to be an outdated thesis, it has long played a key role in visual studies and is currently regaining its importance. It is the attitude towards the ontology of the image that defines the ongoing methods and forms of analysis in visual research (Bagálová, 2014).

1 Methodology

To find the most accurate response, we specified one type of media on which we conducted the research. We chose photographic materials that have been a sought-after anthropological source of

¹ Authors' note: For more information about the author of the photo, see Machaj (n.d.).



Figure 1 : Warriors from the Sepik River basin with distinctive red paint on their faces and bodies are currently on the “warpath”.

information since their inception. The distinctive function of photography as a comprehensive image, a meaningful and expressive tool within the system of scientific knowledge and communication, is indisputable. Key characteristics of photography include its immediate optical perceptibility, concise presentation of information, and factual precision, coupled with documentary fidelity. Often, a photograph conveys more about an observed phenomenon or situation with greater persuasive power than written text.

It is also necessary to note that traditional photography, in its final presentational form primarily bound to traditional printing techniques, is gaining new, unprecedented applications in the era of rapid development in visual information and communication media. This is made possible through the digitization of image records and their subsequent reproduction via these systems (Urbancová, 1987). It confirms the well-known fact that over time, the informative value of photographic documents increases, which may lead to shifts and re-layering of some of their meaningful

components. Their original message enters new contexts, different from the photographer’s initial intent. The same image engages in new interpretative correlations, speaks a different language, and, in a different context, acquires new and revelatory dimensions.

In analysing selected photographs by Martin Machaj, we also had access to additional visual materials that aided in a deeper understanding of the captured phenomena, the people in the photographs and the circumstances of the photography sessions. These materials primarily included video footage, known as “making off”, which documented the author



Figure 2 : A Hewa tribe man with betel red and black smile. Betele smile is a symbol of happiness and joy. Temporary, transient, but pleasant.



Figure 3 : Papuan Venuses are still alive, beautiful, sensual and colourful. Older women from the Ulya tribe paint their bodies with a special blend of oils to appear shiny in the sun. Their huge shell necklaces speak of their status and the wealth of their husbands.

during the creative process, as well as the entire collection of photographs that were not included in our selection or in the author's exhibitions.

2 Project Creative Creatures by Martin Machaj

The body as a universe, with its morphology and physiology, limits the possibilities of culture. Each specific culture apprehends the human body in various ways (for example, walking and running styles, hygiene habits). The body is transformed from a natural into a cultural order. Every known culture interacts with the body in some manner, modifying, disciplining, and attributing various meanings to it. Although the body is a cultural universal, each culture treats it differently, and none leaves it untouched. This is exemplified by the South American Kadiweu, as described in the work *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908 - 2009). The adornment of the human body distinguished each Kadiweu from the natural order: "A man had to be painted to be a man; one who remained in the natural state was no different from nature" (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 129).² Cultures differ more or less in their individual cultural elements, but their smallest common denominator is always the

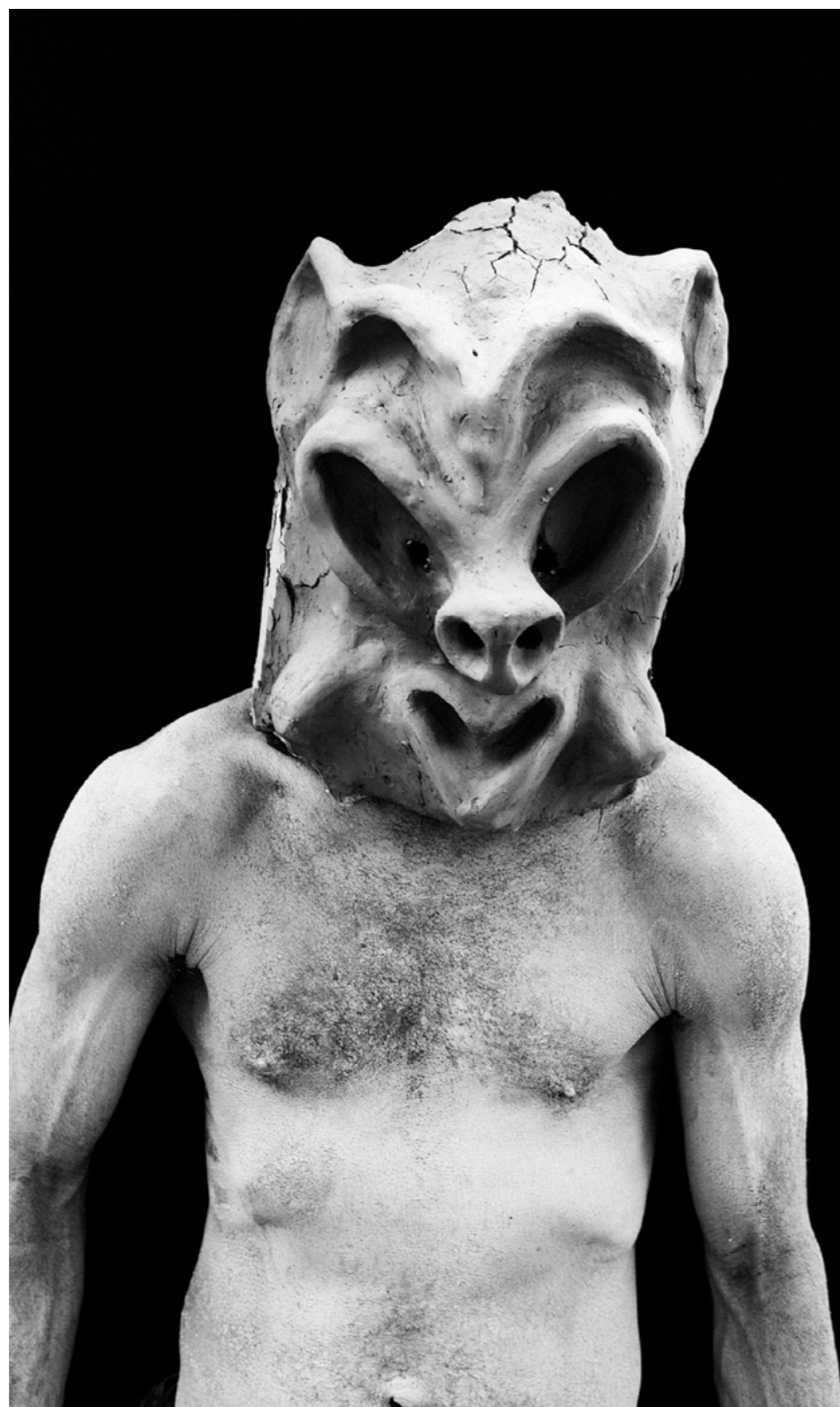


Figure 4 : The Asaro Mudmen tribal warriors from Papua New Guinea in clay masks covering their entire head are in full combat alert. This is how they set off on the warpath in the past.

² Authors' note: Original text in the Slovak edition of the book reads: "Človek musel byť omalovaný, aby bol človekom, ten, kto zostával v prirodzenom stave, nelíšil sa nijako od prírody" (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 129).

human body. In every culture, the human body has been, and still is, modified and deformed in various ways according to sociocultural norms and ideas, thus becoming an artefact, and it is also disciplined (Soukup & Balcerová, 2011).

As an artistic photographer, Martin Machaj has always been fascinated by the human body. His series, including "Woman", "Nymphs", "Naked", or "Story Teller", reflect his relationship with the artistic depiction of the body's beauty.³ Many associate his work primarily with the realms of beauty and fashion, world-renowned fashion magazines, and famous models. However, through his work documenting tribes living in extreme conditions in the most isolated parts of the world, professional photographer and artist Martin Machaj has revealed another dimension of his being and another facet of his artistic creation.

As both an artist and a person, Machaj made a significant life decision to leave the world of beauty in the 'civilized world' and to discover, for himself and others, a vastly different kind of beauty in a nearly unknown and hidden world. He discovered the beauty of people from entirely different environments, with distinct values and priorities, lifestyles, and perceptions of time. He explored

corners of our planet where the cult of the body and beauty is understood in different dimensions than commonly perceived, and possesses very specific forms and values.

The photographs uniquely capture the author's experiences from his travels and highlight cultural diversity, differing worldviews, values, and approaches to life, with the aim of preserving these values while they still exist in the form we know today.

Machaj's photographs of indigenous peoples tell the stories of his travels. He visited the Amazon rainforest, Kenya, Namibia, South Sudan, Papua New Guinea, and other relatively inaccessible and isolated places. Preparing for such expeditions is always very challenging, as they often involve closed reservations where obtaining permission to enter is difficult. Authorities strive to protect the tribes living in these areas. "When you enter these tribes, you must move with immense humility and respect for their traditions and way of life. Humanity is the only way to connect with these people and to capture their story and soul in the photographs", the photographer recalls.

Behind each of the author's steps in Africa, Papua or the Amazon, there was an effort to capture and convey a story. He himself and his photographs have ambitions to be storytellers. Strong stories include the daily struggle for water, food, the favour of the gods, the

preservation of culture, values or simply the struggle for life.

Working with indigenous peoples, especially those as isolated as those Martin Machaj worked with, is an extremely demanding process. It involves numerous challenges and risks, some anticipated and predictable, others entirely unforeseen. Difficult logistics, vast distances, isolation, harsh natural conditions, tropical diseases, military conflicts, permits, kidnappings, tribal wars, aggression from warriors, and challenging communication are all common aspects of field research in such specific and isolated environments. This was also the life of Martin Machaj during this project. He worked with people who spoke their clan or, occasionally, tribal languages. Many had never heard of English. They had rarely seen white people, usually only in the form of missionaries or occasional adventurers, and many encountered them for the first time in the person of Martin Machaj.

3 Series of Photographs from Papua New Guinea - Thematic Areas

Machaj's photographs capture unique anthropological phenomena such as tattoos, scarification, body modifications including facial, dental, lip, and ear alterations, various forms of masking, body painting, extreme adornment, and colourful creations made from hair, feathers, skins, or leaves. The images reveal the diversity

³ Authors' note: For more information, see Machaj (n.d.).

of individual tribes, their social situations, isolation, or, conversely, the impact of tourism and globalization on their daily lives. Thus, he employs a combination of anthropological methods and artistic photography.⁴

One of the main objectives of this analysis is to understand how tourism and globalization are transforming these peoples. They are shifting from traditional adornment techniques used for rites of passage or symbols of beauty to creative, targeted embellishments designed for survival. Their adornments are becoming increasingly extreme, and their tactics for attracting attention are more refined. Many of these individuals are in despair, suffering from wars, famine, diseases, and conflicts; their children and women go missing, forests and water sources disappear, and developers and mining companies quietly annihilate entire tribes. Their environment is infested and polluted.

For many, the only option left is to be Creative Creatures and hope that this will ensure their survival. They are the last of the last. Occasionally emerging from the forest, they seek their place in the modern world. They seize opportunities presented by local or

national festivals and tourist visits for self-presentation. We cannot judge whether this will succeed for them. The photographs reveal that their environment and culture are their identity and life. If they lose this, they will be uprooted and will not survive. This is also what Machaj's photographs convey.

Papua New Guinea can be considered the largest and most culturally diverse tropical island in the world. It is shrouded in numerous myths and legends, stereotypes and half-truths, ranging from ongoing cannibalism to life-threatening encounters with indigenous people who are constantly engaged in warfare.

According to various studies, more than 40 tribes in Western Papua still live without having had contact with Europeans, referred to as uncontacted (Granizo, n.d.; Holmes, 2013), and the discovery of new, previously uncontacted groups remains possible.⁵ Consequently, the relatively slow pace of colonization elicits strong reactions among the indigenous peoples. Some believe these reactions are manifestations of the return of the dead or immortal spirits. The primary form of resistance to colonization involves armed confrontations, which in the past were very bloody but now are limited to ritual warfare, family

retributions, or blood vengeance. Sporadic cases of cannibalism are still reported in Papua, often as a result of tribal warfare or ritual vengeance. The most recent official case was recorded in 2012, but due to the isolation and remoteness of these areas, many cases are difficult to substantiate and document, even today.⁶

The inhabitants of Papua New Guinea are skilled farmers and animal breeders, particularly of pigs. Their diverse and vividly colourful attire, made from natural materials such as grass, animal hides, feathers, bark, and tree leaves, as well as body adornments like boar tusks, clay, bones, feathers, and shells from freshwater and marine creatures, have remained almost unchanged for centuries. This tradition is complemented by the custom of chewing betel leaves, which stains the users' teeth a characteristic reddish-brown colour. Animistic religious beliefs continue to play a significant role today; traditional culture and the associated rituals and religious concepts are an integral part of daily life.

The islands are home to nearly a thousand different tribes and groups, speaking almost 900 languages, which represents up to 12% of all the world's languages. However, most of these languages are spoken by fewer than 1,000

people. While this number may seem incredible at first glance, it is important to understand that Papua New Guinea is not a conventional nation-state. This means that the foundation of the state is not a nation but a tribe. Each tribe has its own customs and language. The Papuan population is incredibly diverse, with hundreds of ethnic groups living in the country (Brown, 1978).

The photographs capture representative tribes of Papua New Guinea in their natural environment, adorned in traditional clothing and decorations, though partially stylized into poses that help the artist highlight the details of their uniqueness and beauty. Their beauty is different; it is raw, at times breathtaking, and sharply contrasts with the concept of beauty in our globalized world. The images speak to their perception of the human body and its value, their views on human beauty and nudity, as well as ongoing war conflicts and latent cannibalism.

4 Image Analysis

In the photographs, Papua New Guinea is represented by the following tribes:

Huli (Haroli)

These tribes inhabit the southern parts of the Tari, Koroba, Margaraima, and Komo highlands. They are one of the largest ethnic groups on the islands. The current estimated population of the Huli tribe is nearly 300,000. The people

still live very simply, adhering to a traditional lifestyle centred on agriculture and pig husbandry. Pigs are the most common commodity and form of exchange, used for payment in various contexts, including compensation for death, ritual payments, and bride price. Ritual warfare and blood vengeance are still commonly practised to this day.

Men from the Huli tribe are renowned for their facial paintings and unique hair styling. They paint their faces primarily with yellow, red, white, and blue colours, with a more vibrant and elaborate design indicating greater success for the warrior. These colours are derived from natural sources, such as plant juices, fruits, insects, or minerals. Traditionally, the Huli made wigs from human hair, specifically from young boys who had to adhere to a strict diet and celibacy to ensure the beauty and appearance of the hair. The hair for these wigs grows over an extended period of eighteen months without cutting or washing. These hairs are then fashioned into intricate wigs, which are richly adorned with colourful feathers from birds such as paradise birds and parrots. At the back of the neck, they wear decorations made from the beak of a hornbill. An important accessory to the overall combat image is an axe with a claw from a cassowary bird. Such adorned warriors can frequently be seen at traditional national festivals and ceremonies.

Asaro

The Asaro Mudmen tribe inhabits the Eastern Highlands province. For hundreds of years, this tribe was isolated from the surrounding world. To give themselves a mysterious appearance, they cover themselves with grey mud and create demonic clay masks to scare their enemies. These masks have made them famous and are still used today to represent the tribe. The legend of the Asaro masks says: "The Mudmen warriors were defeated by an enemy tribe and had no choice but to hide in the Asaro River and wait until dusk for an opportunity to escape. In the evening, the enemies saw creatures covered in grey mud rising from the riverbanks instead of the defeated warriors and thought they were spirits." (Wesemann, 1985, p. 254; Otto & Verloop, 1996, pp. 350-352) Since then, the men of the Asaro Mudmen tribe have used grey river mud to cover their bodies and have made masks from it to instil fear in their enemies. Today, the masks are primarily used as props during presentations at festivals and celebrations.

Enga

Enga is the northernmost province in the Highlands region and is the only province in Papua New Guinea that is both a province and a name for its inhabitants. There are significant cultural differences here, but the people speak the same language, making them the largest ethnic and linguistic group in the country. The Enga people first encountered white men in the 1930s when gold prospectors

⁴ Authors' note: Research and documentation of indigenous peoples in their natural environment and fieldwork is a relatively complex process that must account for numerous factors (see, e.g., Groh, 2018).

⁵ Authors' note: For more information on so-called uncontacted tribes, see, Survival International (n.d.).

⁶ Authors' note: Cannibalism is still sporadically practiced in Papua, according to various records and reports. See, APP (2012).



Figure 5: The skeleton men from Simba (Chimba) tribe are another unusual group. Almost completely naked, men paint their bodies black with white stripes in the semblance of a human skeleton.



Figure 6: The skeleton warriors from Simba (Chimba) tribe love life so much that they paint their bodies the colour of death.



Figure 7: The Huli tribe men – colorful men from Papua are known from their special hair wigs which are made over a course of several months and resemble a headdress or hat.



Figure 8: The Melpa people from the Western Highlands and Jiwaka province are known for their formidable headdresses decorated with huge feathers and shells and for their unique face paints.



Figure 9 : Rhoku Warriors with traditional body scarification and feather headdresses.

conducted an expedition into their territory. Although Enga is now one of the fastest-developing provinces in the Highlands due to mining, it remains a picturesque place of green mountains, and is home to a rare endemic orchid. Enga is mainly represented by the Sili Muli Enga dancers, with their iconic, black-painted faces and unique headdresses. The female dancers from the Enga province are among the most beautifully adorned women in Papua New Guinea. They paint their faces with colourful patterns using black, yellow, red, and white

paint. On their heads, they wear large hats decorated with feathers from birds known as birds of paradise. These birds are among the most colourful and extraordinary in the world, with feathers often reaching lengths of 50 - 100 cm. Each hat of these Enga dancers is adorned with feathers from three to eleven species of birds of paradise, using feathers from approximately 40 - 50 individual birds for a single hat. The long tail feathers are the most used. The bird of paradise is also a national symbol of Papua. During the interwar period, these

bird's feathers became so popular in Europe that they were nearly driven to extinction. For villagers, these feathers hold immense value and, like jewellery, are passed down and inherited from generation to generation.

Hewa

The Hewa tribes were among the last people in Papua New Guinea to come into contact with the outside world. Many Hewa people remained largely isolated until the 1970s, and some of the areas inhabited by the Hewa in the heart of the rugged rainforests were unexplored until 2008 (Thomas, 2009). They are primarily represented by warriors

known as Rhoku warriors, who wear beautiful headdresses adorned with shells and grass, feathers, boar tusks, reed skirts, and have fearless facial expressions that convey courage and determination. The warriors often use traditional adornments during war dances and tribal conflicts. The Hewa are still relatively fierce and aggressive, with conflicts often resulting in serious injuries or death. The tribes are also known for their ritualistic cannibalism.

Chimbu

The Chimbu (Simbu) Province is located in the central highlands of Papua New Guinea. The term "Chimbu" was given to the people by the first Australian explorers in 1934, who heard the word "simbu" (an expression of surprise in the Kuman language) which the locals shouted when they first encountered them. The Chimbu people live at high altitudes in the mountainous province of New Guinea. Relatively little is known about this ethnic group, and they have largely remained isolated. It is difficult to define the exact number of individuals in this group. It is estimated that approximately 60,000 people identify as Chimbu today. The Chimbu tribes are known for their enormous headdresses made from bird-of-paradise feathers, some of which are up to one meter long, and their distinctive body decoration. They adorn their bodies with kina shells and paint themselves with mud and clay mixed with plant oil and pig fat to make their skin shine and retain warmth

even on cold days. The warriors paint their bodies with bone patterns to resemble skeletons, which is why they are called skeleton warriors. Painted in this way, they go into battle to scare their enemies.

Melpa

The Melpa people from the Western Highlands and Jiwaka provinces are known for their impressive headdresses adorned with enormous feathers, shells, and uniquely painted faces. They make traditional face and hair colours from local dyes mixed with plant oil, pig fat, clay, and mud. They use vibrant and striking colours like white, yellow, blue, and red. Men wear wide bark belts with a bundle of fibres in the front and a bundle of leaves attached to the belt. They also carry brightly coloured bags called bilums. Men enjoy decorating themselves with paint, paying particular attention to their moustaches. Traditional clothing and face decoration are reserved for tribal gatherings featuring dances and singing. Some songs resemble war chants and war cries, and the face painting and colour of the hair and beard were originally intended to intimidate enemies.

Chambri

The tribes inhabit the area around Lake Chambri, south of the Sepik River. The men are known for their distinctive body decoration - skin scarification resembling crocodile skin. Scarification is a long and demanding process of body scarring. It is very painful and challenging, requiring

discipline, strong willpower, the ability to endure intense pain, and determination. It is part of the so-called rite of passage rituals, marking the transition from boyhood to manhood.

Conclusion

Papua New Guinea is evolving. From a history of cannibalism, it is taking small steps toward a different world. The customs of the indigenous tribes are deeply ingrained. The natives believe that without their old rituals, they will die. Therefore, in the depths of the island, where civilization has not yet reached, these practices continue to this day. Today, it is purely ritualistic consumption of human flesh or parts, as it is believed that consuming them transfers the attributes of the consumed organ to the person - brains provide wisdom, intelligence, and ingenuity; the heart gives love, emotion, and invulnerability; eyes improve vision and perception. The human head, especially that of a powerful chief, is a strong source of energy.

Missionaries were the first to penetrate unexplored and civilization-untouched areas, starting around the second half of the 20th century. These were primarily Christian missionaries from various well-organized and materially supported church organizations. They began gradually converting the indigenous peoples to the Christian faith. However, this process was not simple at all. Many missionaries paid with their lives

for their courage. Not every village and tribe treated them in a friendly manner, or rather, not for long. As recently as the late 1970s and early 1980s, approximately twenty Christian missionaries were eaten in the wilderness. The last recorded case was the death of a priest and his 12 companions in 1976. They were reportedly killed because they tried to prohibit ritual cannibalism and burned the natives' religious symbols.

Analysed photographs reveal the way of life of indigenous, natural peoples in the 21st century, some of which are relatively unknown and poorly documented even to anthropologists. The photographer ventured to places where few adventurers and travellers dare to go, even today. In addition to diseases and challenging terrain, they face threats from tribal wars and mining companies. Every year, many travellers and adventurers die or go missing on this island.

Photographs from Papua, as well as from other continents in the series "Creative Creatures" by Martin Machaj, tell us about the vanishing beauty of indigenous peoples. His photographs are unique and hold excellent documentary and expressive value for ethnographers and anthropologists. They reflect not only a static depiction of cultural phenomena or situations but also speak about the culture bearers themselves - their emotions, feelings, attitudes, and opinions. This is what makes them unique.

All photos are published with the permission of their author - photographer Martin Machaj.

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