When Ronald and Catherine Berndt travelled to the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea in 1951, they were among the first white outsiders to enter the high mountain valleys of the remote Eastern Highlands region. Indeed, they were among the first handful of trained anthropologists to work in PNG. The Berndts were there to conduct fieldwork for their PhD theses, as Professor Elkin at the Department of Anthropology, Sydney University, saw the research as providing a baseline record for remote groups in the region, prior to their colonisation.

It might seem bizarre today to see the word ‘unpacified’ marked for the region on maps of the period, but the Berndts’ time there represents the crucial moment of the first contact local people had with the external world. A trek with local cargo bearers, from the road-head into the broad kunai grasslands of the upper valleys, was just the start of their journey. Catherine travelled by horseback, having sprained her ankle the day before departure. It was an inauspicious beginning to what was to become an extraordinary foray into a hitherto isolated world. The dense forest, which impeded their ten-day trek, was broken by broad swathes of two-metre high kunai grass across the broad Highland valleys, where villages such as Kogo and Busarasa were located, near the regional administrative headquarters at Kainantu.

The community there, at the junction of the Fore, Usurufa, Kamano, Karle and Yate linguistic groups, was typified as a complex horticultural society reliant on yams, sweet potatoes and pigs, yet to embrace the trappings of the surrounding world. Men and women decorated themselves with ochres and magnificent masks and head dresses for the periodic ceremonies that permeated the cultural life of the region, re-enacting the activities of mythological spirits and their linkages with the living. Made of beaten bark on frames composed of entwined branches, the emblems were ephemeral, and never intended to be kept. The Berndts collected many of them, filling a bush house made for the purpose; they were never able to transport them out, however, and subsequent colonial officers arriving in the district destroyed the collection, dismissing them as a manifestation of ‘primitive belief’. Today, these ephemeral structures survive only in the photographic images the Berndts made. This is why the Kodachromes are, in all their stillness, a frozen instant in time, now long ago. With dance and chanting, people’s decorated bodies reactivated transcendent experiences and confirmed the place of humanity in this remote valley.

Through the richness of the Berndts’ subsequent writings, the complexity and nature of Eastern Highlands’ society was documented and interpreted, and helped pave the way for incorporation into modern PNG society. The Berndts were the first to identify a strange new disease associated with ritualised cannibalism, locally named kuru or ‘the laughing sickness’, the subject of much subsequent research, and is now known to be related to Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

These vivid portraits of local people were taken on a small Leica camera, using precious Kodachrome I film, unobtainable in Australia in the immediate post-War era, but supplied to the Berndts by Margaret Mead at the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

The Highland portraits taken by Ronald Berndt in 1952-3 represent an enduring record of ephemeral cultural expressions, and the people who created and performed with them. These photographs, along with several hundred monochrome images, document the vibrant and complex nature of Highland societies as they existed prior to colonisation.

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