



Villagers carry Moimango, mummified half a century ago, up to his cliff-niche perch. His son, current "big man" Gemtasu

(crouching), hopes to be mummified someday too.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

# Mastering Mummy Science

Mummy expert Ronald Beckett is helping a South Pacific culture revive a disappearing ancient tradition.

I LOVE MEETING NEW MUMMIES. As a biomedical specialist, I've worked on hundreds of them over the past 15 years, everywhere from Thailand to Peru. Normally I study them in labs and museums, but in Koko, a village in Papua New Guinea, where I started working in 2008, mummies are a daily part of the living culture. There's a physical, emotional, human connection with them that's unique.

The first time I visited Koko, I was greeted by a man in tapa cloth with a cassowary bone through his nose. He was holding a bow and arrow. I smiled and thought, Wow, neat! In



fact, he was issuing me a warrior's challenge: Why have you come? "I'm here to work on the mummy called Moimango," I said. "I'm here to examine and restore him so he can

sit on the cliff for many years to come." The next thing I knew, the man was rubbing his nose against mine. He'd accepted my answer. Locking noses makes an official statement of welcome.

It was easier when I met Gemtasu, head of the Anga people of Koko. Thanks to photographer Ulla Lohmann's introduction, I had come at his request. Moimango was his father. He'd been a great warrior and shaman, and some 50 years ago he'd returned to the village from a hunt or a battle complaining of having the "short wind." He lay down by a fire and died. In keeping with tradition, Gemtasu (Continued)





Ronald Beckett (at right) inspects the carcass of a forest pig villagers used to practice mummification techniques. The smoke, he found, is extremely acidic, inhibiting enzymes that contribute to decomposition.

and other family members mummified his body in a special smoking hut, and Moimango was placed in a cliffside gallery alongside other ancestors to watch over the village. But after many years out in the elements, Moimango needed some care.

Mummification was practiced for centuries in Koke, but it's a skill that's largely been forgotten. Christian missionaries have told the Anga there should be no mummifying because it's against God's law. Gemtasu requested my help in bringing this tradition back to life. When he dies, he'd like to be mummified too, so he can sit next to his

father on the cliff overlooking their village.

As in treating a living patient, one of our biggest concerns is not harming the mummy. When Moimango was first brought down for me to examine, I was nervous about how he was propped up. His

head was bouncing—we needed to pay attention to that right away. Normally we'd stabilize the head with a neck brace, but I realized Koke would not have access to this. Still, the Anga knew the jungle. So we created a special patch from tapa cloth. We heated thick, sticky sap from the komaka tree to get his skin to adhere to the scalp. We cleaned the rodent nests from his abdominal cavity and the lichens that had grown on his toes and fingers, using lime from crushed shells. Then we covered him in ritual ocher clay.

When we finished and brought Gemtasu to see his father, he touched him on the shoulder. He started crying and jumping. He took my hands. He was saying, "I'm very pleased. He's here again. Thank you." We left the village a how-to-restore manual, and when I returned this year, Moimango still looked pretty darn good. It was such a thrill to see him again. His head was stable. They'd been taking good care of him. It made me so happy to do a good job for an old man who loved his father. Science is what brought me there, but the human experience meant the most to me.

#### About Our Grantee

Ronald Beckett, 57, is a professor emeritus of biomedical sciences at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut. He did fieldwork in April 2010 to study mummification techniques and rituals of Papua New Guinea's Anga culture.



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