



# Crocodile Men

## Crocodile Scarification as a Male Initiation Ritual in Papua New Guinea

By: Doneisha L. Snider, SOAN 102



**What is the purpose/significance of crocodile scarification amongst the Chambri peoples in the East Sepik Providence of Papua New Guinea?**

### The Significance of Crocodile Scarification

Male initiation rituals have decreased over time due to European contact which sparked labor migration, war and male absenteeism (Roscoe: 1990: 417, Gewertz: 1991). With that, many people may argue that people are not performing this ritual in the numbers that they once were and that these rituals will soon be eliminated. However, the male initiation ritual has persisted, has become somewhat of a tourist spectacle which has forced the culture and the ceremony to shift to fit the needs of the tourists. Overall, the ritual has retained its importance to the Chambri peoples as it puts the men closer to the crocodile creator and tests the strength and discipline of males before they can be considered men (Gewertz: 1991).

### This Practice is Unsanitary!

Many people of different cultures that do not understand the practice are against it for one prominent reason, the unsanitary nature and the risk of disease acquisition. Some US health agencies are against scarification overall, and want to completely outright ban the practice due to its negative health implications for infections and disease (Green: 2005). The practice of scarification is becoming more and more popular amongst small underground subgroups in Western societies due to an increased fascination in “primitive practices” (Gunynup: 2004), and has become a major area of concern for health agencies. In addition, physicians (Green: 2005) and many tattoo artists are against the practice for just this reason. With that, according to Gunynup (2004), scarification is still seen as bizarre and carries a negative stigma.

### General Data

The Chambri community is located in the East Sepik Providence of Papua New Guinea. The culture is very close knit and is a patrilineal society. The Chambri community has been performing the male initiation ritual of crocodile scarification for generations. No one knows when the initiation ritual began but it is used as means to get closer to the ancestral crocodile and as a stepping stone to reach manhood.

Crocodiles are very important to the Chambri people as they symbolize strength, manhood and their creator (Orere: 2007). Men perform this crocodile male initiation ritual to get closer to the creator crocodile and to gather some of the powers that it possesses (Orere: 2007). The initiation itself entails that men spend several weeks going through an education process. When completed, the men are laid down and their backs are cut with bamboo razors with hundreds of cuts on the back and buttocks in intricate designs to signify being eaten and spit back out by the ancestral crocodile and the blood is let to signify the letting of the mother’s blood from the womb, allowing the male to become a man. The wounds are filled with mud and heal over to create a “raised crocodile” look (Gerwertz: 1991).



“Fresh Wounds, A man’s Back is rubbed with a stone as the blood drips down.” <http://www.environmentalgraffiti.com/ecology/when-men-become-crocodiles-extreme-tribal-scar/1261>

Overall, crocodile scarification allows the Chambri to garner a strong relationship with the ancestral crocodiles through a lengthy painful rite of passage that holds very deep meaning for these people (Australian Museum: 2000). The practice itself establishes discipline for the young males and it also tests their overall strength (Gerwertz: 1991). One should not look down upon this act because it garners such a significant meaning to these people as a way to get closer to their ancestors and to finally become men by showcasing their possession of the traits of strength and discipline, exhibited throughout this ritual. Overall, Atkinson (2004) notes that body modification cannot be understood outside of the social world and configuration of that in which it exists. That statement alone shows that many cannot understand what they do not know and what they do not practice. Perhaps, this research will allow others to understand this body modification process and why the Chambri peoples engage in this act.



“Finished Product – A Beautiful Scarred Back.” <http://www.ganoramo.com/photo/2052321>



“Males stand together as their backs heal. Subject to public scrutiny at this time.” [http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/video/tuboo/28697/crocodiles-when-men-become-crocodiles-02802\\_04](http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/video/tuboo/28697/crocodiles-when-men-become-crocodiles-02802_04)

### What is the significance?

There is frequently a negative stigma attached to scarification. Frequently we hear in the news of street kids in third world countries being violently scarred. We also hear about the potential for infection and disease due to scarification. Many cultures that complete the process are seen as barbaric and villains. However, we rarely get the insider’s perspective on the scarification process. People are quick to want to stop the process of scarification altogether but rarely look at what the practice provides for the people that go through the process. This research is important in that it will give viewers, the “insider’s perspective” on the male initiation ritual of scarification in the Chambri village, so that he/she will have a better understanding of the process and the deep meaning that it possesses for other cultures. Overall, the goal is to reduce the negative stigma associated with this practice.

### Conclusion

Scarification is not a heinous, barbaric act. It is seen as a male initiation ritual in the Chambri village that is used to showcase strength and discipline amongst the males and is seen as beautiful by many. However, there are some groups, particularly those in the medical communities and other cultures that oppose scarification because of the health implication, specifically the risk for disease due to the use of unsanitary items and procedures. The unsanitary nature of the practice is a noteworthy concern, however it cannot be a means to justify ending the custom because it is definitely possible for the Chambri to be weary of good sanitation and use more sanitary techniques while performing their rituals and still maintain their cultural practice and retain its significance.

Furthermore, one must understand that scarification is not bad or wrong just because he/she does not engage in it, or the medical community says that it is wrong due to its unsanitary nature. One must understand that these people engage in crocodile scarification and see nothing wrong with it. They endure the pain to go through the ritual that their forefathers went through, to be closer to the creator and to become a man by showcasing their strength and discipline. When understood in this context and when one understands why this specific group undergoes this process, perhaps the negative stigma associated with the practice of crocodile scarification will be greatly reduced.

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