

Skin Deep.

The art of Chin facial tattooing falls prey to passing time

WORDS LUKE CLARK PHOTOGRAPHY JENS UWE PARKITNY

Travel leaves a lasting impression. For German travel agent and keen photographer Jens Uwe Parkitny, a 2001 holiday through Myanmar's Southern Chin State and Northern Rakhine became an obsession. The catalyst was a chance encounter with a woman sporting tribal markings on her face, a traditional Chin form of body art. "I was so fascinated by her that I returned year after year in search of women with facial tattoos." The quest produced the book *Blood Faces*, a rare collection of strong and personal portraits documenting the now-fading art form. Experts believe facial tattooing, once widespread in



Asia, Africa and America, dates back thousands of years. Parkitny says while the exact meaning of the patterns is unknown, they relate to clan affiliation, beauty and spiritual protection, marking the transition from child to womanhood. Traditionally, tattoos were

applied by skilled female practitioners on young clan members aged between seven and 15. Parkitny says most subjects recalled the pain, caused by thorns perforating the skin. "Tears and blood run down their cheeks, turning their faces into 'blood faces,'" he says. With tattooing expertise lost over time, the art is less practised now. For Parkitny, exposure to this unusual form of beauty left an impression almost as indelible as the tattoos themselves. ★

Blood Faces, *Flame of the Forest Publishing*, ISBN 9789814193382, www.bloodfaces.com. Parkitny's share of book proceeds are donated to a children's charity in Yangon.