In this chapter, referring to the Asmat collection at the Barbier-Mueller Museum, the emphasis is on representations of deceased relatives in human figures, ancestor poles (bis), shields, and masks.

These carvings and masks, imbued with the spirits of the dead and named after them, have a vital communicative function: apart from bringing the dead back to the living and providing consolation to the next of kin during the mourning period, they are a vivid reminder of the sacred duty to avenge their death.

About seventy thousand people inhabit a region in southwest New Guinea that forms part of Indonesia’s province of Papua. They call themselves “Asmat”. It was long thought that the name stood for “people”, “real people” or “we, the tree people”. According to Zegwaard (1993) however, “Asmat” means: “People of the land”, “People who live here”, “People who belong to this land”, “People who dispose of this land to collect their food”.

The residential area of the Asmat is in fact one large mud plane covered with tropical rain forests and intersected by countless winding rivers, the largest of...
Cat. 127
Female statuette, Asmat cultural area. Conserved for an unknown period until the 1960s in the collection of the Franciscan Friars Minor at Weerden, The Netherlands. H.: 65.2 cm. Inv. 4273.

which empty into the Arafura Sea that separates this part of New Guinea from Australia. At low tide large strips of mud fall bare in front of the coast which makes it difficult to know where the sea ceases and the land begins. This area, on one side bordered by the Arafura Sea and on the other side by the Central Highlands, is difficult to enter. Not surprisingly, despite the establishment of a Dutch government post in 1936, it was only as late as the 1950s that government control could put an end to the practice of headhunting and entice the population of inland villages to move to the banks of the large rivers. The Asmat have experienced many influences from several directions: Dutch, Japanese, and Indonesian rule respectively; and, Roman Catholic missions and American Protestant religious denominations. However, they continue to live a way of life in which sago and canoes are still essential. The waterways are the only traffic arteries and all transport takes place by means of dugout canoes, incidentally powered by outboard motors, and by dinghies operated by government, missions, and business. Formerly, one went to war in large numbers of dugout canoes. Later on, as reenactments of such expeditions, dugout shows involving many canoes were organized on government high days, such as, in the Dutch period, the Queen's Birthday, or today, for tourists.
The Men's Ceremonial House

According to a myth, recorded by G.A. Zegwaard (1959), the primeval hero Fumeripic built the first ceremonial house or yeu after a number of vicissitudes and wanderings.² However, there were no human beings yet to live in it. Fumeripic then carved wooden images of human beings and placed these in the men's house. They were merely lifeless wooden figures, however. Fumeripic then made a drum, started playing it, and miraculously, the figures came to life, turned into beings of flesh and blood and they began to dance.³

Today, when a yeu is opened, one still refers to this myth and reenacts it in music and mime. Both at this ceremony and on other occasions, contact is maintained with the spirits of the ancestors in an almost mystical manner through drum playing accompanied by singing. A yeu is the centre of a village or of a village quarter. Here, men prepare for important events, such as an initiation ceremony or a head-hunting expedition (in former days). In the men's house, each family has its own fireplace and there is a central hearth belonging to the yeu community as a whole. This is the place where the leaders meet,
important guests are welcomed, and the drummers and singers sit during the feasts. Ceremonial objects such as drums (cat. 173) and masks (cat. 133) used during ceremonies organized by the men of a yeu community, are kept in the men's house. The men's house also serves as a place of learning for boys, where they become acquainted with the world of the ancestors, of whom it is believed that they are actually present, carved as they are into one of the four posts of each hearth. Women only enter the house when a new men's house has to be inaugurated or during a ceremony held when two villages make peace.

**Headhunting**

Until shortly after the Second World War, the Asmat were feared headhunters. This was not so much because they liked to kill people but because headhunting was a sacred duty that ensured the continuation of the cosmos (Gertrands, personal communication). The creator of everything that exists, of heaven and earth, human and animals, was the Great Primeval Headhunter, He who created life by killing.
Illus. 5
Taras, the chief sculptor of the village, poses with a ceremonial spear in each hand. He wears a cuscus fur band around his head and a bone dagger in his armband. Asmat cultural area, Becembub group, Amanamkai village. Photo Michael Rockefeller, 1961. © Metropolitan Museum, New York.

Cat. 129
The Asmat hold a cyclical view on matters of life and death. The universe consists of three domains: that of the living, the dead, and the ancestors. These domains, however, are not just closed entities each on their own but allow for a degree of interaction and movement. The spirits of the dead are placed in an in between phase before being accepted into the domain of the ancestors. It is not possible for them to enter that domain as long as their death has not been avenged.

Cat. 130
Shield associating airon symbols of magic with bipane nose ornaments.
Asmat cultural area, Safan group, almost certainly Basim village, Fayit River. Probably collected by Tony Saulnier-Ciolkowski in 1959.
H.: 180.5 cm. Inv. 4250-E.
Death has a special meaning for the Asmat. To them death and life are closely related. Without death there is no life. This was not just seen as a symbolic concept. Actual deaths through headhunting were deemed necessary for the well-being, fertility, and survival of the group to which one belonged. A natural cause for death was denied. A person died because he or she had fallen victim to the evil intentions of someone else, of an enemy who by way of magic and calling upon supernatural powers, weakened body and spirit of the person in question. The Asmat deduced that each death had to be avenged.

Feelings of revenge are partly triggered off by fear for the spirits of the dead still moving around and bothering the living as long as their deaths have not been avenged. In order not to forget their obligation to the death too easily, figures of the deceased are made and displayed in the ceremonial men's house during a particular death ritual (*vash pokumbu*) or are carved in long poles (*bis*) and displayed in front of the ceremonial house during the *bis pokumbu* ritual (*cat. 132*). Even the domain of the ancestors is not the final stop, for the Asmat believe in reincarnation: in every baby an ancestor is reincarnated. Thus an eternal cycle is in operation.
Reconciling the spirits of the dead and obeying the forceful command of a mythical culture hero to initiate headhunting raids constituted important factors prompting the Asmat into action. Also, a purely human factor as the desire for prestige, “male worth and self-image” (Knauff 1993: p. 189) was no less important. Success in headhunting was a major yardstick of a man’s political, economical, ceremonial, and sexual prowess. However, there were other factors at play as well: the desire to enlarge one’s territory and to make use of the sago groves and fishing waters of the other group; as well as to put a halt to challenges and threats of the enemy.

To make headhunting possible, a certain merging of social structure, political order, and economic system was required. Only through political leadership could alliances be formed with other groups to organize headhunting raids together for both offensive and defensive purposes. The leader’s political influence depended, to some extent, on the number of women he managed to attract; for by marrying women, he became entitled to land, in particular, the sago groves and fishing waters belonging to the families of these women. In this way, he managed to get hold of a surplus of sago which he could distribute during ceremonial feasts such as the bis pokumbu (feast of the spirit poles) and the jamasj pokumbu (feast of the shields) that usually culminated in headhunting raids. As a result of this food distribution, he made other people dependent on him and could thus forge the alliances necessary for warfare. In order to get the opportunity to marry several women, he must have delivered proof of being a capable headhunter. For generally, women despised a man who had not proven his prowess by headhunting. Such a man would become the object of derision, be considered a coward, and be denied any sexual favours.

The women’s displeasure in such cases was understandable as they urged the men to avenge the death of a husband, father, brother, son, or other close relatives with whom they had a special bond. Their involvement was also demonstrated in that they formally performed the task of ritual decapitation and then received the lower jaws of enemy skulls to wear as part of their necklaces.
The Asmat did not treat headhunting lightly, but with the greatest of respect. It was a necessary act to safeguard their continuation as a people.⁹

The Initiation Ritual
As a man’s vital strength was considered to be particularly present in his skull and one had to supplement one’s own life force, it was impossible for boys to grow up without headhunting. Therefore, the initiation rituals took place not long after a headhunting raid. During a specific stage at the initiation ritual the neophyte had to hold a recently severed skull in front of his genitals for meditation. On this occasion, the young man received the name of the victim,
who lived on symbolically in the person who had adopted his name. In this manner his vital strength was also assimilated into the group that had killed him. The initiation ritual was continued by means of a ceremony symbolizing death and new life. In a dugout canoe in which the newly decapitated head was placed, one took the young man towards the setting sun, which is in the direction of the realm of the ancestors. The boy acted as if he grew older until he finally collapsed as an "old man". One of his maternal uncles then lifted him up to immerse him together with the skull in the water. When he came to the surface again, the boy was "reborn". The skull he had held between his legs was presented to a female relative to be hung near the banana trees, coconut palms, or in the sago groves, in order to stimulate their growth.

Ceremonial Life and Art

Asmat life was dominated by cycles of grand ceremonies that involved artifacts of the type presented in the Barbier-Mueller collection: spirit poles (cat. 132), shields (cat. 130), and masks (cat. 133) that "embodied and commemorated the feast-givers' deceased agnates, especially those who had been headhunt victims" (Knauf 1993: p. 190). These ceremonies were, for the most part, aimed at appeasing the spirits of the dead by promising vengeance and stimulating them to undertake their journey to the land of the dead. Headhunting being crucial to these ceremonial proceedings, it is not surprising to find images of the praying mantis (cat. 129), the hornbill (cat. 128), and the palm cockatoo frequently occurring in the art of woodcarving. The praying mantis is a headhunting symbol because of the female's habit of occasionally biting off the male's head after mating (illus. 4).
The hornbill, the palm cockatoo, and the flying fox bat (cat. 131) are corresponding symbols because these birds eat the fruit of trees, a metaphor for the hunter who eats the brains of his enemy. As noted above, the identification of tree and human being is derived from the Asmat myth of creation recounting how figures carved out of wood became living humans by an act of the primeval hero Fumeripic (Zegwaard 1959).

The Bīs Ceremony
The identification between human being and tree is also demonstrated by the meters-high spirit poles called bīs (cat. 132) and the ritual surrounding the process of carving and painting them. Bīs and their special ritual feasts are only known from the Becembub, Bismam and Simal Groups of Central Asmat and the Safan Group of the Casuarina Coast. Once a tree is chosen from which to carve the pole, it is attacked as though it were the enemy to be decapitated. It is cut down (as one kills an enemy), striped of its bark, whereby a blood-red juice is released resembling the blood of a dead person being skinned. The tree is then brought to the village, where the women welcome it shouting with joy in the same manner they welcome a slain enemy. The tree is now taken to a separate work place or laid down in front of the men’s house where the woodcarver will carve the ancestor figures and the headhunting symbols (Gerbrands 1966, 1967a). When finished, the bīs usually consists of several human figures, one above the other, the one at the top end having a large openworked pennant protruding from its body (cat. 132). This segment, the cemen (penis) is carved out of one of the
realm of the ancestors.

When the ritual is performed by a group of people, the mask is used to convey aspects of the ancestors' presence. The mask is often associated with the sky, and its movements are said to reflect the ancestors' actions. The mask is used to communicate with the ancestors, and the performance is believed to bring about good fortune and protection.

The mask is an important part of the ritual, and its use is often accompanied by music and dance. The mask is believed to have the power to protect the community from evil spirits and to bring about good fortune.

The mask is also used in other cultural contexts, such as in weddings and funerals. In weddings, the mask is used to protect the newlyweds from evil spirits and to bring about prosperity. In funerals, the mask is used to protect the deceased from evil spirits and to bring about a peaceful transition to the afterlife.

The mask is an integral part of the ritual and serves as a symbol of the ancestors' presence. It is used to communicate with the ancestors and to bring about good fortune and protection.
buttress roots of the mangrove tree from which the pole is carved. This is clearly in reference to the cosmic dimension and the spiritual significance of the penis as a container of life. Small human figures are often carved into this protrusion. These may represent spirit children or possibly headhunting victims.

The *bis* are made for the so-named *bis* ceremony when a number of such poles are erected in front of the men's house as a demonstration of the tangible promise by the living to avenge the demise of the relatives carved into the poles.

The deceased are encouraged to leave: "We have brought you here, but do not stay here. Go instead to Safari!" (Konrad 1996: p. 296b).

During the ritual, the ancestor poles stand facing the river, as an analogy to the dead buried with their feet pointing in the same direction as that of the river which leads to the sea; and then, from there to the realm of the ancestors, behind the sea. In that regard, the *bis* serves as a dugout canoe taking the souls of the deceased to the realm of the dead as is visualized by a small canoe carved at the base end of some of the *bis*.13

A prerequisite for a *bis* ceremony is that it be organized by an experienced headhunter, one who has taken as many as six heads, as the ceremony should result in a successful raid (Kuruwai 1984: p. 19, as cited by Knauf 1993: p. 189). During the ritual the men boast about their heroic deeds. Mock battles also take place, perhaps in order to expel the spirits of the dead. At the conclusion of the ceremony the pole is attacked by the men with a stone axe, "cutting off the hands, feet and arms of the figures, severing the cernen from the trunk and finally breaking the dugout in two. After the ceremony the remains of the poles are taken out of the village and allowed to rot: "the bodies of the dead decompose in the forest" (ibid.) while their spirits would stimulate the growth of the sago palms.

The Mask Feast (*jipae* or *bi pokomban*) 14

Apart from representing the dead in woodcarvings (cat. 127), Asmat spirits are also vividly represented by masqueraders who perform during the mask feast.15

The *jipae* or *bi pokomban* feast is one of the many expressions of Asmat culture showing the deep bond between the living and the dead. The masqueraders come out of the forest at dawn to make their round in the village. Fathers present their children to the "spirits of the dead" and these may touch the testicles of the boys and the nipples of the girls to ensure the children will grow up well. This feast has an important social purpose as well: to not leave widows and orphans behind without support. During the feast a masquerader representing a deceased parent will adopt the orphan. That masquerader is usually a brother from the father's side who has agreed to look after the child. Taking care of a widow can also be ceremonially assumed in this way by a brother of the late husband. During the last performance, the masqueraders go to the men's house where the names of the new foster parents or husbands are announced. The spirits of the deceased then set off from the men's house to travel to the realm of the ancestors.
Epilogue

Asmat art has become perhaps the most publicized of all arts of New Guinea. In recent decades changing social circumstances have had a bearing on Asmat art. Today, Asmat art can be divided in a number of categories in terms of continuity and change, and depending on a specific social context, for example:

- carvings made for ceremonial use;
- carvings made for the Asmat’s own use but in an acculturated context, e.g., church carvings;
- innovative carvings made for the annual Asmat Art Festival;
- mass-produced carvings for tourists, e.g., imitation bowls from Sawa Erma, derived from bowls but turned into flat wall decorations.

Stylistic changes have occurred in traditional motifs, e.g., the rendering of the human figure on shields has become more naturalistic as though in motion. “Abstract” curvilinear patterns on shields are augmented by naturalistic motifs, such as human and crocodile figures; traditional proportions become distorted, e.g., non-functional enlargements like a prow model with an oversized prow or a shield with a large openwork part at the top end depicting a particular scene or story; motifs from elsewhere (e.g., Southeast Asian dragons, copied from matchboxes) are incorporated in traditional carvings like prows and ancestor poles (bis). Finally, entirely new genres have been invented, both of a two-dimensional or three-dimensional nature. Examples of the former, such as the flat relief boards in which shield designs are carved, originated in northwest Asmat. Innovative three-dimensional woodcarvings are particularly made in central Asmat. These are usually anecdotal in nature and they convey a particular story or illustrate scenes taken from daily or ceremonial life.

Notes

1. In these, as in other types of objects that belong to the collection—such as drums, bowls, spears, and halved axes—headhunting symbols are usually part of their ornamentation.

2. A recent substantial compilation of Asmat (and Karo) myths and legends, as recorded by Gerard Ziegwaard, and others, was published by Offenberg and Pouwen (2002).

3. In view of the similarity between a wooden figure and a human being, which is indicated in the myth of creation, it is not surprising that to the Asmat a tree and a human being are almost identical, whereby the tree’s branches are seen as arms, the roots as legs and the fruit as a skull. It then becomes completely understandable that fruit-eating animals such as the black king cockatoo, the hornbill and the curucus (a marsupial) become headhunting symbols often found in woodcarving. As an animal eats the fruits of a living tree to stay alive, likewise a human being hunts another human being’s head in order to strengthen his own vitality through the life force of the dead.


5. The aspect of prestige is clearly evident from the decoration of the Asmat during ceremonial occasions. Through elements such as bird feathers and a head band made of curucus fur, he identifies himself with certain animals that are associated with headhunting. A central part in the decoration is the nose ornament made of shell (bixawan), an important headhunting and cosmic symbol that is also carved as a motif in various woodcarvings, such as drums and shields (cats. 129, 130).

6. A successful headhunting was often followed by a “collective heterosexual ritual” (Knauf 1993: p. 189; following Dowards 1981; Van Kampen 1966).

7. A man could be delegated to do that on their behalf.

8. Enemy skulls were usually pierced at the sides using the sharp edge of a stone axe in order to remove the brain (see Schneeburg 1990: illus. p. 54). The brain was then eaten so as to share the victim’s power. The skulls of deceased relatives were surrounded with great care and attention. The eye sockets and nasal cavities were filled with earth and set with grey grass seeds and red fruit kernels. A splendid feather headdress was often placed around the brow, as though the deceased was still to take part in a dance feast. Skulls of relatives had the lower jaw still attached and held in place by means of plaited rattan.


10. Semi-dead, more permanent counterparts of these temporary bis are placed near the fireplaces in the men’s houses (see Gerbrands 1967a: cat. 36).

11. Konrad and Dowards 2002. Much detailed information on meaning and design of the bis as well as the carving and ceremonial process is provided by Abraham Kuruwaip (1974); see cat. 132; see also Dowards 1981b.

12. The work with axe, adze, and chisel can take several weeks, because the woodcarver can not work on it all the time. He has other obligations as well such as beckoning sago, hunting, or tending, or participating in the ritual songs in the men’s house.

13. This particularly the case among the Bocambuk group of Central Asmat and the Sakan group of the Casararu Coast. Many bis have a pointed end that allows for an upright display when the end is stuck in the ground, an option that is not always used as some of such bis are also displayed in a slanting position, resting on a scarpfolding, like the bis that end in a cane model (see Gerbrands 1967b: plates on pp. 140–142; Helfrich 1995: figs. 8.4 & 8.14).
Asmat war canoes during a regatta.

For an extensive field report on the jipae feast of central Asmat see Zegwaard 1990. See also Sowada 1996 for an eyewitness account of the bi pokomban feast in northwest Asmat.

"As far as is known, the costumes only represent people who have recently died and are not used to impersonate ancestors and culture heroes in general." (Zegwaard 1990: p. 33a).


An instrumental role was played by Alphonse Sowada, Bishop of Agats, and his colleagues of the Croix mission in stimulating preservation and innovation of the arts by their efforts in founding and maintaining the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress at Agats and organizing the annual Asmat Art Festival (see also Strathern and Stewart 2002: pp. 46-47).

See Konrad, Konrad, and Winkelmann 1996; and Smedt 1996.