THE CHANGING ASMAT WORLD: A SURVEY OF CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC CHANGE FROM 1950-2001

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DEDICATION

To my daughter, Lilian Ailene
Because when you’re old enough, I just can’t tell you that I gave up.
Art is the core. Without it, Asmat culture would die.
- Alphonse Sowada
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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the effects of rapid culture transition in a culture that had few elements of change imposed upon them. It is usually very difficult to approximate causative relationships initiated by culture change, as there are usually so many elements involved that no direct correlations can be discerned. Although the scope of these elements was far-reaching, the causative factors were few, thereby enabling correlations to be established. By documenting outside cultural forces and investigating their effects on the formal and iconographic changes in artistic representation, the present investigation makes a direct correlation between the cessation of warring culture and change in conduct of traditional rituals and production of carvings. By identifying these correlations in Asmat society, perhaps my research concepts can be applied to similar situations in other cultures.

The problem with contemporary Asmat carving is that it seems to be very similar to pre-contact objects, yet one of the main purposes for these carvings, head hunting, has been removed from the culture. How, then, do the Asmat integrate their new way of life with their old traditions? To investigate this issue, this study explored the history of use and ritual concerning the *bis* pole, a well-known form produced by the Asmat. It also analyzed the poles artistically, attempting to find differences between old (1954-1981) and new (1981-2001) poles. The *bis* pole is ideal for analysis here, as its purpose historically incorporated commemoration of the dead, avenging the spirits who were killed in inter-village raids, and the rebalancing of life force that is the driving force behind their cosmology.

The research materials used here consisted of written documents by Catholic missionaries embedded in the Asmat region, research on the Asmat by anthropologists and artists, interviews I conducted with Crosier missionaries that served in Asmat, and formal and iconographical analysis of 43 *bis* poles. These interviews were especially helpful, and made it possible to pinpoint specific areas of discussion not covered in previous written works. The Crosiers and their attitude toward indigenous cultures are central to the transformation of this society. Bishop Alphonse Sowada, who attained a master’s degree in Anthropology before being assigned to Asmat, directed this group of missionaries to incorporate Catholic dogma with native beliefs so as not to completely decimate the history and culture of the native people.

So far the present investigation suggests through literature review and artistic analysis a marked changes both in carving form and ritual content between the days of head hunting and now. The Asmat have embraced the cessation of raiding and head hunting, and have adapted both their rituals and their art to maintain their cultural traditions. Many traditional head hunting symbols, such as the praying mantis, have been discontinued. The purpose of the *bis* feast cycle was always to rebalance life force in their animistic society. Now they perform the cycle without seeking vengeance for their family members who died violently. They now focus more on the remembrance of the dead than on the grief for the dead who are represented in the poles.

By finding direct correlations between culture change and artistic expression, this study has utilized a construct by which to investigate dynamic situations such as those in Asmat over the last 60 years. It has also identified specific topics, too extensive to attempt here, of further research that are important for a complete understand of their culture and history.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Asmat are a people who have only recently begun to culturally assimilate with the world. Because these changes have happened only in the last 60 years or so, documentation of the result is available. Unlike many situations where culture change occurs, the Asmat were only affected by one main change—the cessation of warring practices. Though this element encompassed almost every area of their lives, it was a single source for many adaptations. Because of this single source, I believe it is possible to discover correlative relationships between this change and the direct effect on Asmat artistic forms, specifically in the bis pole. In this paper, I provide information concerning the history of outside contact, explanation of the bis pole and the bis feast cycle, specific examples of imposed culture change and how the Asmat responded, art and its place in Asmat religion, and an independent artistic analysis of bis poles in an effort to identify direct effects on style over time.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss the historic background of the Asmat region, as seen by outsiders. Documentation by early explorers is the only written account we have of these early days, as the Asmat were not a literate people until the Indonesian languages was introduced to them in the 1950s. Early attempts by these explorers were not very successful, since the Asmat fiercely defended their territory and had no ability to verbally communicate with the newcomers. After repeated attempts by both the Dutch and the British, outsiders mostly gave up trying to explore Asmat land.

In Chapter 3, I explore the definition of bis. Bis poles were traditionally present in two different areas of Asmat, used for different purposes. This paper centers on the bis produced along the central coast, used for the commemoration and appeasement of the dead. I also explain
origination myths associated with the *bis* ritual and offer thought concerning the similarities and differences between the oral histories and the actual composition of the carvings. Next, I explain the purpose and process of the *bis* feast cycle, both historically and contemporarily. Finally, I discuss the recent diffusion of the *bis* form from its original culture area to other areas in Asmat and the change in purpose of these new forms.

Chapter 4 discusses culture changes imposed upon the Asmat beginning in the 1950s by Catholic missionaries and follows these changes through the transition from Papua as a Dutch-held territory to the independent state of Indonesia and how the Asmat responded. The focus of early contact, both by the missionaries and the governments, focused on ceasing the head hunting and raiding that was a daily reality in Asmat life. I describe the lengths taken by missionaries to preserve the indigenous culture, including the introduction of programs designed to stimulate carving for economic gain and the opening of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress. I continue the discussion to present-day Asmat and how they have adapted their materials and traditional forms to merge their traditional and Catholic belief systems.

In Chapter 5, I explain commonly understood beliefs concerning primitive art, a discussion of traditional Asmat religion as it pertains to this topic, the purpose of ritual in Asmat cosmology, and the function and meaning of their ritual carvings. The origination myth of Fumeripits illustrates why the Asmat are so strongly tied to wood, to the materials available in their surroundings, and illustrates the belief that human spirits can be called into carvings.

Spirits are an integral part of Asmat religion. Spirits that inhabit a man can either help or harm him, and after his death can wreak havoc on the living if not properly honored. Balance is the key to Asmat belief. If the spirit world is not kept in balance, the living will pay the price. This is the reason that head hunting existed for so long in Asmat. The spirits of men, women, and
children killed in raids demanded revenge for their deaths, much as “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” is presented in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. The Asmat believed that if these deaths were not avenged, any number of scourges would descend upon their village. Thus they conceived rituals to aid in the rebalancing of the life forces. The bis form is a product of one of these many rituals. As a ritual carving, it has a specific function for said ritual and contains culturally-specific iconographical symbols that I will explain below.

Chapter 6 includes my analysis of bis form over time and across regions of culture variance within Asmat. I referenced 43 bis from many villages, and show stylistic variation both among culture areas and between historically traditional and new traditional forms. I identify specific symbols found in this sample of carvings and explain how the use of them has either changed or the meaning has been adapted to fit the current needs of the ritual.

Finally, I discuss the implications of this research and suggest areas for further exploration in order to more completely understand the Asmat way of life, both historically and presently.

In order to analyze change in artistic representation over time, I first had to define the time period covered by both old and new bis. Outside influence on the Asmat’s artistic work began almost as soon as outsiders came into the area: first from the introduction of metal, which the Asmat used as more precise carving tools than stone, and secondly from art dealers and anthropologists asking the Asmat to attempt new images. The Asmat readily incorporated these new elements and produced forms that varied from their traditional objects. However, the rapid change in artistic style did not begin until 1981. The Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress began a yearly carving contest in 1981 that challenged the carvers to invent new forms. Driven by reward and prestige, it was at this time that the Asmat began to invent forms never used in
ritual, such as the contemporary scenes of daily life. Thus, old poles are here defined as any bis carved before 1981, and new poles as those carved after. In the sampling of bis used in this analysis, the oldest poles date from 1954.

The first catalyst of change in Asmat life came in the early 1950s when Catholic missionaries first entered the region. Father Zegwaard, M.S.C. and a group of catechists went to Asmat in an attempt to introduce the people to Christianity and cease their rampant warring practices. These first years focused only on cessation of warring and introduction of the Indonesian language in order to learn Catholic prayers and practices. The Asmat were resistant to these attempts and the missionaries did not gain much ground. In 1963 when Indonesia became an independent state, government officials stepped in to finally terminate the Asmat’s warring ways. They did this by burning the ritual houses and carvings produced during ritual cycles. They also banned any further carvings associated with ritual, as they believed all Asmat ritual centered on raiding and head hunting.

The changes produced by these actions were sudden and intense. The Asmat immediately lost every vestige of tradition, thereby severing them from the practice of their beliefs and interrupting the normal function of their daily lives. Crosier missionaries in the area identified these serious problems and attempted to intervene with the government on the Asmat’s behalf. The mission advocated that carving continue without the raids sometimes associated with the rituals and also challenged the Asmat people to restructure their ritual cycles so that they could continue without head hunting.

Artistically, these changes had direct effects on the bis form. Iconographic symbols directly tied to head hunting and warring, such as the praying mantis, the presence of trophy heads, and protrubant tongues and bared teeth quickly disappeared from the bis carvings. The
bis ritual itself no longer includes the element of revenge for lives taken, but rather focuses on commemoration and honoring of the dead. At the end of the ritual, the poles, which were once returned to the forest to decompose and renew life, are now sold to outsiders for economic gain. Changes in iconography and feelings about the final carvings are remarkable examples of the effects of imposed culture change.
CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Geography and Environment

The island of New Guinea as we now know it is split between two countries: Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Papua New Guinea is an independent nation and consists of 183,500 square miles of the eastern half of the island. The western half of the island is governed by Indonesia and covers 151,700 square miles. (White, O 1965:1) The Asmat live in a section of west New Guinea along the Casuarina Coast once called Irian Jaya, now called Papua.

The entire island is second in size only to Greenland. This relatively newly formed piece of land is home to nearly all of the world’s climatic zones. Across the center of the island are close, rugged mountains that rise to more than 16,000 feet. Though the equator passes just to the north of the island, snow is a common sight on the peaks of the mountains. Along the north coast and western bight, swamps rule the land. Between the two extremes lie marshes, rain forests, and at higher altitudes, deciduous forests. (White, O 1965:2,6-7)

The coastal climate is generally hot and humid. The average temperatures range between 70 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and the annual rainfall is between 100 and 780 inches (White, O 1965:3). These monstrous amounts of rainfall, when combined with the newly formed sedimentary soil, provide a nutrient-poor growing environment for crops. Thus, agriculture in the Asmat area, which has both poor soil quality and alluvial swamps, is quite difficult. (White, O 1965:4) Luckily, the profusion of animal and plant life available on the island can easily support hunter-gatherer populations (White, O 1965:13).

Many marsupials exist both in New Guinea and Australia, but even more animal species are unique to New Guinea alone (Lagerberg 1979:31). The over eighty varieties of birds-of-
paradise are just one example (White, O 1965:9). The island is also home to many other tropical birds, including cockatoos, hornbills, parrots, egrets, and cassowary. Native pig species and prolific fish populations in the nearby Arafura Sea provide a plentiful diet of protein for the Asmat. (White, O 1965:9)

In this swampy, poor soil, mangrove trees, nipa palms, and sago palms flourish (White, O 1965:6). The Asmat utilize various parts of the trees for building, carving, weapon making, and eating. The sago palm provides both dietary starch through its inner pith, and if cut down and left for a period of time, sago grubs mature inside the tree trunk that are later harvested and eaten by the Asmat for special occasions.

The land of New Guinea has both provided for and separated its people. Within a relatively small area, a tribe is able to gather enough food to feed its population. The terrain, with sharp changes in climate and altitude, serve to deter the populous from expanding their areas or attempting to travel great distances. Perhaps these factors encouraged the isolationism that still exists today among tribes. Each people became its own world, with its own language, and were unaccustomed to outsiders of any kind. Intruders, whether visiting peacefully or not, were then seen as a threat to the tribe’s way of life. From these confines of the tribe’s known world can we begin to understand the people of New Guinea’s reaction to historical “first contact.” (White, O 1965:20)

Pre-History and First Contacts

The land of New Guinea is still under discovery. As recently as 2006, new species of flora and fauna have been found and documented. Hundreds of years ago, Asian and European explorers found New Guinea to also be a wondrous land of discovery.
The pre-history of New Guinea is not well known. The many languages of the island have been intensely studied as a way of tracing the history and evolution of these languages back to their roots. It is assumed that most of the over 200 Papuan languages have only been spoken for around 10,000 years, though some commonalities of the northern languages may have been spoken as long as 60,000 years ago. (Lagerberg 1979:32) When one considers both the geographical isolation and linguistic differences among the tribes of New Guinea, it is no wonder that these situations produced territorial, defensive peoples. As explorers from the outside world, both from Asia and Europe, attempted to explore the island, it is no surprise that the natives attacked the foreigners and protected their lands (Biskup, et al. 1968:20).

Early European explorers are notorious for their ability to conquer and locate valuable items. Upon locating yet another new, lush land, the initial attitudes about New Guinea were as such. The first sure contact with New Guinea was by a Portuguese man named Jorge de Meneses, who made landfall in the northwest of the island in 1526. Borrowing from the Malay word for “fuzzy-haired man”, or orang papuwah, he decided to name this new land Ilhas dos Papuas (Biskup, et al. 1968:17).

The Spaniards were next to attempt the island. Between 1526 and 1529, Alvaro de Saavedra sailed past the island of Biak, off the north coast of New Guinea Island, and claimed to have spotted gold. He thus gave the name Isla del Oro. (Souter 1963:17) His descriptions of the natives, “whom he found to be black, with short cri[m]ped hair or wool, similar to those of the coast of Guinea in Africa, gave rise, no doubt, to the alteration of the name, for at a later date the island became known as Nova Guinea, or New Guinea [sic]” (Collingridge 1906:24). Luis Vaez de Torres sailed from the eastern end of the island to the west, passing between it and Australia in 1606 and noticed a distinct similarity between what he saw before him and the Peruvian
mountains (Biskup, et al 1968:18, Souter 1963:17). This likeness to the gold-bearing Peruvian ranges gave Torres the idea that perhaps the New Guinean mountains also contained gold (Souter 1963:17).

Both the English and the Dutch became interested in New Guinea during the sixteenth century. Many English captains visited the area, including Carteret and Cook. Both men landed on the island and proceeded to map several nearby islands. There was even a short-lived settlement in the northwest, though displeased natives and rampant disease caused the settlers to leave within two years. (Biskup, et al 1968:19)

The Dutch happened upon New Guinea as they were trading in the Spice Islands, which are just west of the big island. As part of a treaty with the Sultan of Tidore, the Dutch claimed the western half of New Guinea Island, adding to their previously taken Spice Islands. (Biskup, et al 1968:19) Several attempts were made at settlements, but all found the native diseases difficult to overcome. Successful settling began to take place at the end of the nineteenth century, and the town of Hollandia (now Jayapura) was founded in 1910. (Souter 1963:22,132)

During the mid-19th century, the church also began to see a need in New Guinea. The first to attempt a mission were Marist missionaries who had previously been stationed on the Solomon Islands. As the other explorers found out, the malaria and other diseases were impossible to overcome. After five years, a group of Italian missionaries relieved the Marists, and another three years later the Italians were forced to give in and go home. (Souter 1963:23)

Dutch interest in the interior mountain ranges, both for climbing and for minerals, led to more invasive over-land investigations. In 1907, H.A. Lorentz, along with five other mountain climbers, decided that the best way to reach Wilhelmina Peak was by way of the Noord River (now the Sirets) in the middle of Asmat country. “They were the first Europeans to meet
inhabitants of the *bergland*—small men wearing only phallic gourds—but unfortunately they were attacked, and were obliged to kill one of the natives” (Souter 1963:133). The journey was then bombarded by sickness and lack of food. The explorers were forced to retreat before reaching the mountain top. (Souter 1963:133)

During the early 1900s, a few Dutch colony towns did succeed along the coast, but little was done in the more hostile areas. Though the Australians were able to forcefully pacify some of the natives on their eastern side of the island, they were at an impasse as to what to do with the land. During the late 1940s, the United Nations began pressuring both the Dutch and the Australians to turn over their colonial control of New Guinea. Though Indonesia expressed interest in the Dutch holdings, the Dutch thought that their New Guinea territory should go to Australia, as geologically the island is connected to Australian land. (Lagerberg 1979:30-31)

At the end of WWII, the East Indies requested independent rule. Holland fought the request, as trade for spices and other goods in the East Indies were valuable. The United Nations insisted that the Dutch leave, and in 1949 the Republic of Indonesia was formed from the prior Dutch holdings. (Biskup, et al 1968: 153) After having had such a large portion of colony taken away from them, the Dutch clung to western New Guinea. As the Australians were also forced to give up their colony on the island, the Dutch could no longer argue that the western island be turned over to them. Ethically, the Dutch also believed that the natives of western New Guinea should have some say about whom they were to be governed by. (White, O 1965:99) After years of political turmoil between the Indonesians, the Dutch, and the United Nations, the western half of New Guinea was finally ceded to the Indonesians in 1963.
What is bis?

The word bis refers to the large ancestor poles carved by the Asmat that depict human figures, embellishments, and a large wing-like projection at the top, called a cemen. The top figure, a figure of a man from which the cemen emanates, is always the spirit to whom the pole is dedicated. The other human figures in the pole can be men, women, or children. Bis also includes the ceremonial cycle, or the feast, that includes the making of the poles and all of the rituals included with the making that process. The word bis itself is from the Bisman culture area, meaning “makers of the bis,” located along the Central Coast of Asmat (Kuruwaip 1984:14). The northern areas of Asmat also produce small bis, which are used in the construction of fireplaces, but whose cultural significance will not be discussed here.

Bisman is a unique culture area in Asmat. The bis feast, particular to this area, “commemorates the death of the ancestors and symbolizes renewal of life and augmentation of life force” (van der Zee 1996:8). This area, which once stretched from the Unir to the Ewta Rivers, now is seen as two distinct areas. The Bismam now includes the area from the Unir to Sirets Rivers, and the Becembub covers the southern area from the Sirets to just north of the Ewta River. (Kuruwaip 1984:14) For this discussion, I will use the cultural area names as they are currently described, as per Konrad’s 2002 publication.

The bis ceremonial cycle, or feast, comes from a long tradition of lore. The Asmat’s myths and oral traditions saturate their culture and are taken very seriously by all. The bis feast is just one example of this. The process of the feast not only produces an aesthetically amazing carving, but provides essential services to the Asmat. Historically, it helped to restore balance
through the recognition of those killed in battle with neighboring villages and to recognize those within the village who killed enemies in the same battles. The feast, both historically and contemporarily, assists the dead in their passage from the limbo that one enters upon dying to the final destination of the spirit, Safan, land of the ancestors.

Originally, the Asmat’s intentions for the bis feast were purely spiritual. Changes to their culture have added additional incentives to the production of the bis poles, however. Now not only does the feast serve as a spiritual equalizer, it also serves as a means of economic gain. Following is a description of the history, process, and purpose of the bis feast cycle.

The Myth of Bis

The origination story of the bis differs between the Bismam and Becembub regions. The first telling of the story is from the Bismam area and the second from Becembub. The stories are taken from Kuruwaip and Konrad, recorded twenty-two years apart. In the Bismam telling, the first bis is made in the likeness of a woman named Bis. In the Becembub version, it is fashioned after the father of Beworpits. It is curious to note that though the character Bis shares her name with the ancestor poles currently carved, no bis poles are dedicated to women.

Bismam Myth

Daru and Bis live in their own house as a happily married couple. Daru is an older man whose looks are marred by a foul skin disease. Bis is a young woman whose beauty is admired by the entire village. Daru becomes unsure of his ability to keep the beautiful Bis as his wife, so he decides to imprison her in a large sleeping mat in their house. The mat is wrapped around her and sewn shut so that only her nose and mouth show through a small hole. When Daru leaves
the house, he not only leaves Bis in her mat prison, but he bars the door so that even if she could escape the mat, she could not leave the house.

    One day when Daru leaves to hunt, Bis’s relatives are watching the house so that they may free her, as even they are not allowed to visit the girl. Her parents, Beworpits and Teweraut come to rescue, opening the door and helping her out of the sleeping mat. As she was never allowed freedom to wash or to relieve herself, she is filthy. They take her to the river and bathe her, then return to their own house to feed the thin, undernourished Bis.

    After Bis’s needs were met, her parents helped her to a canoe and she headed upstream to seek out a new, kinder lover. When the correct place had been found, Bis got out of the canoe and began walking. After a while, she was met by a large cassowary bird. “She asked the bird, “Will you be my friend?” The cassowary replied, “Yes, I will lead you and I will become your foster mother. I will lead the way and you will follow me.”(Kuruwaip 1984:16)

    Back at the village where Daru lives, he has returned home from his hunt. He becomes hysterical when he finds that Bis is gone. None of the villagers have any sympathy for him, however, because they had warned him before that if he continued to treat his wife as a hostage, she would one day escape and be gone forever. He began to cry and cry. Bis’s parents, upon returning to the village, explained to Daru what had happened, and that they had sent Bis to find a new lover. He continued to cry, and eventually cried himself to death in his house.

    Bis and the cassowary walked day after day until they heard the sound of a bamboo horn. The bird took her to the source of the call and introduced her to Pupuripit. Bis related her story of captivity to Pupuripit, and he told her that he has been sounding his call to attract her, as he has been waiting for her.
At this point, the two versions of the story vary. The following is the ending to the Kuruwaip story:

Bis meets Pupuripit’s parents, who are also named Beworpits and Teweraut. They are excited that their son’s wife has arrived, and decide to play a trick on him. Pupuripit’s mother, Teweraut, plays sick and stays in the canoe. After no one is around, she sneaks Bis into her house and hides her under a sleeping mat. She and Beworpits call for their son, and as he arrives, they throw back the mat to show Bis. He is delighted at the sight of her, and they are immediately married.

Some time later, Bis went fishing by herself. While she was gone, Puperipit missed her very much. He decided to carve her likeness into a piece of wood so that if she was away, he would always feel her close. He completed the carving and called it Bis. Everyone who saw his carving was impressed and began to imitate him. Although they named their carvings after their own relatives, the form of the carving was thereafter called Bis. (Kuruwaip 1984: 16-17)

The alternate ending from Konrad is as follows:

After Puperipit and Bis met, Puperipit decided to hold a celebration to commemorate his wedding to his new wife. At the same time, he wants to remember the newly dead, so he takes a large pole and carves into it several images of his beautiful wife. To properly work the faces, he asks Bis to sit for him so that he may get every detail just right. When he finishes, he is happy at the close resemblances between the faces and his new beauty. He names the entire carving Bis, and sends his wife back to the house. Not long after, Bis dies. (Konrad 1996:269-270)
Becembub Myth

Along the Sirets River, there was a village named Sitan where a man named Beworpits lived with his wife, Teweraut, and their two children. Two brothers, Tewer and Seitakap, lived at the mouth of the Sirets River.

The two brothers had very different personalities, Seitakap being very outgoing and boisterous; Tewer being quiet and concerned about his brother’s actions. One day just as Tewer was telling his brother to be quiet, a stranger approached. It was Beworpits, who was hunting for human flesh. After he decided that the two brothers were alone in the village, he threw his spear and killed Seitakap. Tewer ran and Beworpits quickly cut off Seitakap’s head and butchered the meat. After carrying the meat to his canoe, Beworpits paddled home to a warm welcome from his mother.

The entire village came running to greet Beworpits and accompanied Seitakap’s head through the village. After dividing the meat, they put Seitakap’s bones into the fire. While drumming and singing, the villagers heard a voice coming from the fire. It was Seitakap, returned from the land of the ancestors to teach them a new custom.

This new custom was a way for the living to keep contact with their dead ancestors and to bring happiness to the village. As long as these new instructions were followed, Seitakap said that the ancestors would help and protect their living descendants. The people of the village were to make carvings of those who had died and to name them the same names as those called in life. If a man’s family members were dead, then they should also be included in the same carving with him and named appropriately. This special carving would be called *bis*.

Beworpits proceeded immediately to begin this new ritual. He and other men went to the forest to find a tree. The women stayed behind in the village and began drumming and dancing
in the men’s house. Upon the men’s return with the tree, the women met them to ward them off, as if they were enemies. The tree then entered the men’s house and the carving began.

The first figure carved was Beworpit’s father. Seitakap insisted that human blood must anoint the carving in order for it to invoke power. This was the first $bis$ pole. (Kuruwaip 1984:15-16)

The Purpose of the $Bis$ Feast

Both the $bis$ feast and the $bis$ pole, manufactured during the feast cycle, serve many purposes in the Asmat culture. First and foremost, they are the means by which the dead are able to pass from their initial state of limbo to the world of the ancestors, $Safan$. The village families commemorate their recent dead and help them with this dimensional crossing both as a showing of gratitude and as a way to gain the favor of the ancestors. If the Asmat successfully complete the $bis$ ritual and the dead cross over to be with the ancestors of ago, perhaps the ancestors will smile upon the living and repay them with good luck in their lives.

Although only a few families’ dead may be represented in a particular feast’s poles, the entire village is involved in the ritual process. The $bis$ pole makes a visible and concrete link to the abstract idea of dead spirits and other worlds. Using this process, the Asmat restore balance to their society, both living and dead. Only with this balance can the Asmat prosper. (Konrad 1996:275)

In the recent past, head hunting was also involved in the $bis$ feast. As part of remembering the dead, part of whom had been killed at the hands of enemy villages, the villagers would be filled with vengeance and anger, readying them for a retaliatory attack. By taking a life for a life, balance would be restored for the dead souls. Now, this rebalancing is achieved
through the Christian God. The Asmat allow Christ to take on the sins and anger, thereby releasing them from this never ending cycle of violence. (Virgil Petermeier, personal communication)

The *Bis* Feast Cycle

I have found no written record of the *bis* feast process from before head hunting was abolished. The following examples, therefore, all take place after both missionaries and government statues were in place. It should also be noted that although in these descriptions the feast seems to flow very quickly, they are, in reality, a very slow process. Several elements contribute to the timing of the feast. First, many of the villagers work in logging, which keeps them occupied for much of the day. While the actual carving of the *bis* only requires the carvers, the many ceremonies surrounding the felling of the tree, etc., necessitate all of the village members. Second, the carving process must be slow. The *bis* are carved from softwood, which must be allowed to dry slowly or it will crack. Last of all, daily happenings can affect the pace of the feast. If someone important dies the week before the final ceremony is due to take place, the village elders may decide to stop the feast so that a *bis* can be dedicated to that person. These interferences could set the entire feast back by weeks or even years. Scheduling is not important to the Asmat, so the specific timing of any two feasts is unlikely to be the same. (Virgil Petermeier, personal communication)

A *Bis* Feast in Biwar Laut

The earliest recording of a *bis* feast is recorded by Father Frank Trenkenschuh in 1970. Although he goes into little detail, he does mention the fact that this description is for “the feast
of new Bis Poles” in Biwar Laut, Bismam (Trenkenschuh 1982b:36). Trenkenschuh simplistically describes the way that the tree is selected for the bis feast and the fact that it is brought back to the village. Upon arriving back at the village, the men who harvested the tree are met by the women, who defend the village by attacking the men as if they were a warring faction of an enemy village. Then this portion of the feast culminates in the celebration of Papisj, a ritual wife-exchange for bonding and sexual purposes (Zegwaard and Boelaars 1982:21). Next comes the carving of the pole in the yeu. After the carving and decorating has been completed, more mock battle ensues, ending with drumming and dancing. (Trenkenschuh 1982b:36-37)

A Bis Feast in Ewer/Syuru and Atsj

Abraham Kuruwaip, then curator of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress in Agats, relates a 1973 telling of the bis feast. There is no specific month or time of year in which a bis feast should begin. The big men in the village agree to hold the feast when they feel it is time to honor the recently deceased and help the dead transcend to Safan. First, all men of the village repaint the dugouts and don their warring body decorations. They then paddle to the jungle to select the correct tree for the bis. The women stay behind, enter the yeu, and begin to drum and sing.

Once the men locate the chosen tree, they separate into three groups. One group stays with the canoes to guard them, another group clears the brush around the tree, and the last group goes into the forest to collect young sago leaves. Upon returning with the sago leaves, the men tie them to the trunk of the tree. Upon decorating the still-standing tree, the men return to the village. The leader of the feast instructs them to go into the forest to fell sago trees so that they
may begin incubating sago grub larvae. The sago grub plays an important part in the timing of the festivities, as it takes from 30-40 days after the tree falls for the grubs to fully mature.

The men soon return to the site of the chosen bis tree. The women again stay behind in the village to sing and drum in the yeu. Again the men divide into two groups. Of the two groups, one splits into three smaller groups. One group goes to fish while the other two gather more sago leaves and hunt the bakapoer bird, a yellow finch. Of the remaining men, half go to the canoes to prepare for transport and the other half go to prepare the tree.

The war leader who is the head of the feast comes to the tree as if he were a warrior stalking an enemy. He shouts the names of six people that he has killed, ending with chopping at the trunk of the tree with his axe. He is then replaced with another war leader who lists the names of five fallen enemies. The second war leader continues to chop at the trunk of the tree, and this pattern continues until the tree is felled.

After the felling of the tree, the men who chopped it down and the men at the canoes descend into a mock battle. When the hunting and fishing groups have accomplished their assigned tasks, they return to decorate the log with their bounty. After the mock battle and decoration are complete, the head war chief decides the final length of the pole. At this point, another warrior begins to cut the chosen length, again crying out the names of those men he has killed. After the log is cropped, the men remove a part of the top of the felled tree that will be carved into a small canoe and a sago dish.

The men must then prepare the log for transport. If it is small enough, they place it inside one of the canoes. If it is too large, they tie it to the side or between two canoes and float it back to the village.
As the men arrive back at the village with the log, the women of the village meet them and attack, as if attacking an enemy faction. Once the women have ceased their attack, the men proceed to the *yeu* with the log and prepare to begin carving.

The log is first placed upon a mat of *yimenbot*, the bark of a specific tree. The main war leader begins to rough out the figures that will later be carved by the wow-ipit. He calls out the names of ten men he has killed. When the guidelines of the *bis* are carved, the men carry the pole into a special section of the *yeu* constructed just for the carving of the *bis*, the *ecawor*.

The men first gather to properly name the *bis*. The name of the entire pole is the same as that of the main figure honored in the *bis*. After the naming, the carvers are then well fed by the commemorated spirit’s family. After the feasting, the carvers design and finish the *cemen*. Once the carving of the *cemen* is complete, the honored spirit’s family once again provides food, a freshly killed pig. A mock battle ensues and lasts late into the evening. To finalize this portion of the carving, the entire village goes out to gather sago, grubs, and other foods, then distribute all of the food among the villagers.

The next section to be carved is the *Bis-Anakat*, the main part of the tree trunk. The carvers work many the many spirits represented in the pole. At this point in the carving is when the revenge head hunting raid associated with the feast would take place. In times past, the main warrior would tell the men to seek out the enemy to bring back flesh and blood. Once this mission was accomplished, the men would bring the human remains back and proceed to rub blood all over the carving in order to consecrate it. The warriors would take special consideration to the vital areas of the body: the eyes, mouth, and genitals. At the end of this section of carving, the villagers are again ordered into the forest to cut down sago trees to hasten the development of the sago grubs.
The last section of the *bis* is the **Ci** and **Bino**. **Ci** is the Asmat word for the small canoe that sometimes appears at the *bis* base, and the **bino** is the sharpened end that is driven into the ground. The villagers first go into the forest for four days to prepare sago for yet another feast. The women gather the sago grubs, wrap them in leaves, and take them to the **yeu**. After the carving is complete, the men gather and paint the pole with white, red, and black.

Carving complete and brightly painted, the *bis* is ready to be revealed to the villagers. Men remove part of the roof of the **ecawor** and reveal the top portion of the pole. As the villagers see the figures, they begin to cry and grieve for the deceased.

As the people quell their grieving, drumming and singing begins. This music and revelry continues until dawn, when the **papis**, or ritual exchange of sexual partners is honored. This ends the celebratory portion of the *bis* feast.

Now that the *bis* pole has fulfilled its ritual purpose, the men return the tree to the sago grounds. By allowing the carving to break down and return to the earth, the ancestors present in the pole bless the sago crop and help to ensure good harvests. The pole, if left intact, retains its spiritual power. Because of this power, they remove the hands of the figures carved on the *bis* so that the pole may not bother travelers who pass nearby. This ends the feast. (Kuruwaip 1984:19-21)

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**A Bisj Feast in Yepem**

Ursula and Gunter Konrad also relate a telling of the *bis* feast, gathered from an Asmat informant from the village of Yepem, Bismam. There is no date associated with this information, and the differences between this description and the one above can be attributed either to difference in sub-culture or changes due to the passage of time.
The decision to hold a *bis* feast is made by the village elders. Once they decide to begin, the elders venture into the forest to gather young shoots from the sago palm. These are taken back to the *yeu*, stripped, and tied to the forward posts at the fireplaces. The fireplace of each family who is to carve a *bis* is decorated with these shoots. Sago trees are cut down to begin the maturation of the sago grub at this time also, to set the pace of the feast.

The next morning, men go back into the forest to select the tree for the *bis* pole. The area around the tree is cleared and tree trunk itself is cleared of any other plants growing on it. After marking the chosen tree, the men return to the village to the sound of drums and bamboo horns.

The following day, young and old men, clad in traditional costumes, return to the forest to remove the *bis* tree and return it to the village. They take many canoes and make much noise by beating the sides of the dugouts with their oars and sounding horns. As they approach the area of the forest that contains the selected tree, they break out into a simulated battle.

As the battle comes to a close, specific members of the family associated with the tree decorate it with sago leaves and lime to prepare it for felling. The older men who took heads of enemies in the past call out the names of their victims and begin to separate the roots from the ground. Others then join in to cut away the roots, again reciting the names of those killed in battle. Once the log is on the forest floor, the men decide the final length of the log, cut away the excess, and strip the bark from the tree.

The young members of the group gathered various small animals from the forest while the older men were cutting down the tree. After the tree has been dressed, the animal offerings are tied to the jutting root of the tree that will later become the tsejmen.

At this point of the feast, a unique addition is added in the tradition of the people of Amborep, Simai. A *biw* mask (one or more) appears when the trees are being cut. All of those
who see it are frightened and flee either running away or climbing trees to avoid being captured. The mask runs among the trees chosen for bis, and then it disappears. The mask(s) may appear again when the bis poles are revealed at the end of the feast. This tradition is not part of the bis feast in other parts of Asmat.

The men carry the poles to the river and fasten them to the outside of the canoes to float them home. They sing songs all the way back to the village, where they are attacked by the women in a mock battle, as described above. The men announce that they have just made kills, making analogies between the trees just felled and a real vengeance expedition.

After the women’s attack, the men carry the poles and lay them in front of the yeu. The poles are then covered with leaves and left there overnight. Papis is commonly celebrated during this night of the feast.

Early the next morning, all of the women and youngsters of the village leave to go gather sago or fish. While they are away, tall the men of the village gather to make important decisions about the carving of the bis. The men directly involved with the carving of the poles meet to decide upon the distribution of carved figures. They sing songs and recall the names of those they have killed in battle. They use axes to rough out the figures while still outside the yeu, as axes are not allowed inside the yeu for carving.

The carving room built onto the yeu for the bis is called the yom cem in this area of Asmat. The poles are taken into this room before the women have returned from their gathering duties. The women and children are now no longer allowed to see the poles until they are revealed at the end of the feast.

The morning that the poles are to be unveiled, the brothers-in-law and sons-in law decorate them. The poles are painted in white, black, and red. Cassowary feathers, coix and
abrus seeds, sago leave bundles, and other adornments are added, much as the Asmat decorate themselves for the feast. The women have gathered sago grubs and brought them to the yeu. It is now time to bring out the *bis*.

Mid-afternoon, the singing begins and the *bis* make their first appearance. The men carry the *bis* through the yeu and to the door. The top end of the pole, where the *cemen* is located, peeks out first. Then it withdraws back into the yeu. After several of these motions to excite the crowd of villagers, the men finally take the pole out of the yeu and to the wooden scaffolding erected to hold the *bis* in an upright position. The men hoist the poles upright and tie them to the scaffolding with rattan rope. After the poles are erected, the celebration begins. The villagers sing, dance, drum, and eat. The party continues late into the night.

In the Central Coast area, in Simai, Bismam, and Becembub, the *bis* are planted directly into the ground and stand alone. Along the Casuarina Coast, in Safan, the *bis* are displayed leaning against scaffolding built just for this purpose. (Smidt 1993bb: 101) The *bis* poles remain upright for three days before they are taken down. On the fourth day, they are taken into the sago groves and laid on the ground. After saying goodbye to their ancestors’ spirits, the men destroy the images of their forefathers. They remove the arms, hands, and feet of the bodies, and even remove the *cemen* from the pole. They then gather the pieces of broken *bis* into a pile, cover them with leaves, and leave them to rot. “The bodies of the dead decompose in the forest“ (Konrad 1996:296). (Konrad 1996:275-296)

*Bis* Feasts in the 2000s

Since the preceding accounts were recorded, life in Asmat has further changed. Tourism continues to influence the area, and the Asmat continue to carve for sale. The men who once
participated in head hunting raids are getting older, and a new young generation is coming up in the ranks. As mentioned before, part of the *bis* ceremony used to directly concern vengeance raiding. The warriors proudly called out the names of those they had personally killed. Now the younger Asmat know nothing of this tradition of killing and have no names to call or confess.

The abolishment of head hunting has been both a bane and a blessing to the Asmat. The Asmat feel liberated by Christianity in that God takes care of the imbalances in their spirit world and they no longer live in constant fear of raiding. They have had to adapt their lives and rituals to an existence without head hunting and cannibalism. Leaving head hunting out of feasts is now a conscious decision, rather than one that is forced upon them. (Konrad 1996:80)

The last vestige of the *bis* feast can only begin if it is organized by a man who has killed in a raid. The old men, then, are the only ones who can dedicate spirits to the poles. If the Asmat continue the tradition as is, once the older generation has died, there can no longer be traditional *bis* feasts. There is discussion about the involvement of the younger generation in current feasts. Eric Sarkol, director of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress in Agats, reports that the younger men confess the names of those their antecedents have killed. It is still unsure at this time whether this practice has already begun, or if he believes that is the next step for the Asmat to preserve this feast tradition. (Jerry Martin, personal communication)

Different groups have also tried to lead feasts on commission. One village did so as a strictly economical venture, but delayed it while waiting for gifts from the government. While they were waiting, many people went crazy from being possessed by spirits. On a separate occasion, the feast was not correctly performed and twenty people died of inexplicable causes.

While the *bis* feasts continue to be performed for the benefit of the people and the ancestors, the Asmat embrace the selling of the pole once they have served their purpose. They
now see returning the *bis* to the forest as a waste of product. Where the Asmat once believed that the spirits of the poles could continue to do harm to people passing through the sago fields unless they broke the poles, they now see the culmination of the feast as the end of their relationship with the object. Since the pole’s purpose has been fulfilled, they no longer need to keep the carving, so they do not mind selling them. Another explanation for why the Asmat can let the poles leave their culture lies in the idea that once the spirit has passed on to *Safan*, the poles are devoid of any power and thereby useless.

They now also produce more finely carved poles, as buyers will pay higher prices for such a piece. Thus the Asmat complete the feast cycle while still maintaining a foot in the present world market. (Jerry Martin and Troy Belford, personal communication)

The spread of *Bis* beyond the Bismam

The *bis* pole, consisting of its unique form containing multiple figures and the *cemen* projection at its top, began in the Bisman, as mentioned above. Trenkenschuh mentions that the *bis* pole exists only in the central and coastal areas and does not extend to the north (Trenkenschuh 1982b:36). Kuruwaip describes the original area of the Bismam as the area “between the Unir and Ewta rivers, including the villages of Ewer, Sjuru [Syuru], Yepem, Per, Wus [Uwus], Biwar-Laut, Atsj, Amanamkai, Yow, Ambisu, Damen, Atambuts, Omanesep and Ocenep” (Kuruwaip 1984:14), but does not give a geographical border as to how far inland this area stretched. Based on the cultural areas defined in Konrad’s 2002 map of Asmat, the cultural areas that now occupy the original Bismam, as per the villages mentioned above, are Bismam, Becembub, Kenekap, and Safan (Konrad 2002:inside cover).
By 1973, when Kuruwaip wrote his report, the bis had also spread to the “villages of Yaosakor, Kaimo, Os, Awok, Beco, Fos and Warkai” (Kuruwaip 1984:14) These villages now lie in the culture areas of Simai, Kenekap, and Warkai (just outside of Safan). This shows diffusion of the art style further through areas that already had the bis in 1970.

Konrad discusses the advance of the bis form and notes the current culture areas of Bisman, Becembub, and Simai as the original bis carvers (Konrad 1996:267). The adoption of the bis to areas beyond the original Bisman may have been due to the cessation or earlier ceremonial forms, thereby creating a need for a replacement. For example, Emari Ducur, the northernmost Asmat area, abandoned carving the wuramon after the outbreak of an illness. The people felt that the wuramon was too powerful for them to make, so they took on the bis tradition to replace their old ceremony. (Konrad 1996:268) The eastern area of Safan also has taken on the bis to replace the crocodile sculptures they once used to remember their dead. (van der Zee 1996:15)

Konrad also notes that in 1978, we see economy and prestige as incentive to learn and adopt the bis feast. Bayun, in the Safan region, invited carvers from Ocenep (originally Bismam), to come and make a bis in their village. By this invitation, the people of Bayun were hoping to learn the bis form in order to gain attention from the government and tourists. Thus we see the Asmat beginning to be motivated by the allure of money rather than the need and respect of the spiritual aspects of the bis. (Konrad 1996:268)

As of 1996 when Konrad published their article on the bis feast, there were a total of nine culture areas that currently produced bis poles. These are: Emari Ducur, Unir Sirau, Kenekap, Simai, Joerat, Bisman, Becembub, Safan I, and Safan II (In Konrad 2002, Safan I and Safan II
are incorporated into one area called Safan). (Konrad 1996:317) In the span of 23 years, the \textit{bis} form has greatly spread throughout most of the culture areas in Asmat.

Just outside of Asmat, in the Mimika area, there is a form closely related to the \textit{bis}. The Mimikans produce a sculpture called \textit{mbituro} which is used to remember the dead. It is also used in the boys’ initiation rite when their septums are pierced. So here we see both a linguistic (\textit{bis} was formerly spelled \textit{mbis}) and cultural tie between these Papuan neighbors. (van der Zee 1996:15)
It is common for ideas to be exchanged between cultures. It is obvious to us every day in our age of global information exchange, and this rapport between different societies has been going on for millennia. Some cultures in various countries around the world have managed to avoid these exchanges, mostly because of geographical accessibility problems, but sometimes because they fervently defended their land.

The Asmat, who live in a difficult area, bordered both by the sea and surrounding mountains, did not welcome outsiders. They repeatedly drove away explorers and conquerors from other lands, thus keeping outside influence and culture exchange at bay until the 1900s. Because of this late contact, we have documentation of the sudden and drastic changes that took place in their society after the implementation of western laws and ideas. In this chapter, I will give details that correlate direct imposition of culture change and the ways the Asmat adapted to these radical alterations, specifically concerning their ceremonial traditions.

Early contact

The earliest evidence we have of outsiders visiting the Asmat and staying long enough to trade items was in 1904. Two Dutch ships sailed into Flamingo Bay and were soon met by the local Asmat, probably from Syuru. Excited and curious about these strange new objects on the sea, the locals boarded many canoes and went out to investigate. Soon the Dutch ships were surrounded by the Asmat, and were frightened enough that they fired weapons into the air to drive the locals back to shore. The next day, one of the ship’s officers decided to take a small boat to the village to attempt contact. He was again surrounded by Asmat in canoes wielding...
spear and paddles. Outnumbered and unsure of his standing with the natives, he fled back to his 
ship. At some time during these two encounters, the ship’s crew was able to trade knives and 
other western items for eleven Asmat items. Of these, eight were utilitarian items with very little 
or no carving, two were bamboo horns with elementary patterns, and one was a shield with 
simple geometric designs. These now reside in the Leiden Museum. Feeling unwelcome and 
not wanting to risk starting a battle, the Dutch ships retreated and went about their mission 
elsewhere. (Hoogerbrugge 1973:26)

In 1912 the first missionary contact was established by the Catholics. Directed from the 
Kei Islands, a man named Fr. Munster made occasional patrols in his motor boat, but little 
influence was attempted with the Asmat. (Wassing 1993:29) In 1907-1914, Dr. H.A. Lorentz 
made his expedition to New Guinea to explore the mountains. He visited Flamingo Bay again, 
and traveled up the Lorentz River, now the Unir River, in his journey to reach Wilhelmina Peak. 
Although the goal of this trip was not to study the Asmat, the team of explorers did trade with the 
natives for more items to take back to the Netherlands with them. Between 1907 and 1923, the 
Lorentz group and two other ventures collected 45 simple oars and 5 with decorated tops, 10 
simply decorated bamboo horns, 40 spears with intricately carved blades, several nicely carved 
shields and others with “confused ornamentation,” four “poorly carved” human statues, and ten 
drums, “not one with a really beautiful handle” (Hoogerbrugge 1973:27). Hoogerbrugge goes on 
to mention that no canoe prows or bis poles were collected at this time. Looking back, this is not 
surprising, though the area being explored is at the western edge of the Bismam, as the bis would 
not have been kept around the village in case tourists came by to purchase them, and the idea of 
cutting the canoe prow off the canoe to sell it had probably not yet been introduced.
Col. Goossens, when conducting an exploratory excursion for the Dutch military between 1908 and 1913, acquired several shields and well-carved sitting figures. In 1922, Paul Wies visited Asmat on a collecting trip for the British Museum. Not only was he able to obtain several small carved human figures, but he also brought back the first *bis* pole seen by westerners and several decorated canoe prows. In 1935, Lord Moyne, whose Asmat art also resides at the British Museum, bartered for a carved house pole and several more canoe prows. (Hoogerbrugge 1973:28)

Until World War II, when some villages in Asmat were occupied by the Japanese, the Asmat had only lived amongst themselves, excepting a few outlying villages which had contact with their neighbors, such as the Mimika and the Auwju. After the war ended, however, heavy raiding broke out in Asmat and many of the northern villages fled to Mimika to escape the terror. Father Zegwaard, M.S.C. was stationed in Mimika with a missionary post and there met the Asmat for the first time. He studied the Asmat language and was the first to learn what the people called themselves—“Assamat-ow” meaning “we people” (Wassing 1993:29). By 1949, as many as 6,000 Asmat were living in Mimika, nearly outnumbering the Mimikans in their own territory. The reigning Dutch government exiled the Asmat back home to calm tensions between the two peoples. (Wassing 1993:29-30) After their return home, Fr Zegwaard was put in charge of the Asmat, and he helped set up the first mission in Syuru in February 1953. (Zegwaard 1982a:10)

**The Beginning of Permanent Influence**

The port of Agats, situated near the Unir River, was established by the Dutch as a trading station in 1954. They named the village Agats after the Asmat word *akat*, meaning “good” (Wassing
1993:30) The Catholic missionaries had arrived the year before and had set the Asmat up to log for ironwood in the nearby forests in September of 1953.

The wood was shipped to Merauke, along with ethnographic materials, including a *Bis* pole. (Zegwaard 1982a:11) Since accessing the Asmat area was now made easier by the port, Dutch collectors became very interested in the art and took many pieces back home with them. This increase in desirability led to an increase in carving. Also because of steady contact with outsiders, it was now much simpler to acquire metal to make carving tools, speeding and adding precision to their carving techniques. Between 1954 and 1963, the Dutch Museum was thus able to obtain over 50 *bis* poles. (Hoogerbrugge 1973:28) During this early period, tobacco was first introduced to the Asmat. It would play a powerful part in trading from then on. (Wassing 1993:30)

Even before Zegwaard was officially stationed in Asmat, he began placing catechists in the western villages. These catechists would begin learning the local languages and teaching the people both the Indonesian language and about Catholicism. A great feat was for the village children to successfully learn their prayers in both Asmat and Indonesian. (Zegwaard 1982a:8) At this time, it was quite dangerous for the catechists to live in the villages. Although the missionaries and the Dutch had done best to suppress warfare as soon as they entered the area, raids and the taking of heads were still common in all of Asmat. (Sowada 2002:50) They were frequently forced to move sites with the villagers if they fled in fear. More often, the catechists fled away from their assigned villages to get out of the dangerous situation.

In the next few years, there was always tension in Asmat among the natives, the missionaries, and the government. Head hunting and warring were still common between villages, and small skirmishes often resulted in someone being badly beaten or killed. A Crosier
Father, Jan Smit was shot and killed when he was summoned to help end a verbal argument between two men over governmental meddling in the area. (Trenkenschuh 1982a:32) Through all of the turmoil, the Crosier missionaries continued teaching the locals about Catholicism and trying to end their warring ways.

The Republic of Indonesia assumed complete control of the country on May 1, 1963, from the Dutch through the urging of the United Nations. (Wassing 1993:31) The Indonesian government had no use for the Asmat from the very beginning. The government saw them as useless, as they had no contributions to add to the gross national product, and they needed nothing in trade as they lived off the land. A mistranslation of the Asmat word ndat or ndet by the Dutch spread the idea that the Asmat’s carvings were related to Satan worship. Although the correct interpretation meant that the carvings contained spirits, not Satan, the erroneous seed was already planted. (Virgil Petermeier, personal communication) Added to the hate the Indonesian government already felt for the Asmat, they sought to destroy Asmat society as it has previously existed. The Asmat had to be enculturated and made into productive members of society.

There are two different reports of when the burning of the yeus first occurred. The first is burning of yeus a response to Rockefeller’s disappearance in 1961. (Konrad, Konrad, and Winkelmann 1996:307) The second account details that on May 12, 1964 A.E. Rumbaij, Indonesian Civil Administrator of Asmat, burned yeus and forbade carving in response to a return to head hunting, which was in turn a response to a lack of western supplies such as tobacco coming into the area. (Sowada 2002:53) To begin this process, in 1964 and 1965 the government sent representatives to each village where they announced the abolishment of all feasting, warring, and any items associated with these cultural elements. They began by gathering every “graven” image in the village and burning them. Then they destroyed the yeus,
the ritual houses associated with the clans in each of the villages. The Asmat were told that any warring actions would be met with the strictest of punishments, and that head hunting and cannibalism were no longer allowed under any circumstance. (Trenkenschuh 1982b:35) In one fell swoop, the Indonesian government wiped out or abolished everything that the Asmat had ever known in the world. By these actions, the Indonesians felt that they would make the Asmat “human.” As long as the Asmat began to work as “real people” did, by logging and such, they could be rehabilitated from their savage ways. Otherwise, they would revert to being animals by again resuming their cultural traditions. (Alphonse Sowada, personal communication)

Mission Response
Alphonse Sowada, O.S.C., was ordained as Bishop of Agats on November 23, 1969. He had been a part of the mission in Asmat since May of 1961, traveling to New Guinea immediately after receiving his Master’s Degree in Anthropology. He had worked diligently after arriving in Asmat, and by the time of his ordainment spoke Indonesian fluently, as well as several Asmat dialects. (Trenkenschuh 1982a:36) To further the Crosiers’ ability to understand and teach the Asmat, after becoming Bishop, Sowada insisted that all Fathers and Brothers assigned to the Asmat region must have at least one year of anthropological training. Upon arriving in Asmat, Sowada’s personal vision was to help the Asmat “be able to face a master and compete in this modern world” (Alphonse Sowada, personal communication). Little did he know how harsh that master would be, as the government impositions descended on the people that he wanted to help.

Once the ban was imposed, only strictly functional items were carved. No embellishments were allowed on paddles, canoes, bowls, or other utilitarian objects. (Alphonse Sowada, personal communication) Immediately the Crosier missionaries began collecting any
cultural carvings not destroyed by the government officials. (Schneebaum 1985:28) The church never forbade feasting or carving. Zegwaard was even a proponent for keeping the old traditions in Asmat alive, head hunting excluded. (Zegwaard 1982a:28) Sowada also encouraged the Asmat to continue their traditional carvings, though changing the meaning of some of the forms so not to provoke the people into head hunting. During the early period of mission presence, the Asmat had already combined some of their traditional art forms and ceremonies with Catholic ritual, forming uniquely Asmat ways of understanding Christianity. As the Indonesian government had no quarrel with the Catholics or other missionaries in the area, they also had no problem with these amalgamated ceremonies continuing to be held. (Schneebaum 1976:69)

In 1962, the people of Sawa and Erma made new canoes. They wanted the pastor, Sowada, to bless them. He was unwilling to do so, as the carvers had made the canoes without the elaborately carved prows that honored dead warriors. The people were confused because the old canoe feast had centered on vengeance and retaliation for those killed in raids. He asked them to reconsider the purpose of the canoes and prows, to make the carving be commemorative rather than as propagations of war. The men quickly adapted their views, cut down new trees, and produced the beautiful canoes known so well in their area. (Sowada 2002:52)

Even though the Indonesians unknowingly allowed the Asmat to keep some of their traditions alive through the church, many cultural ceremonies literally disappeared overnight. Without the regular planning and activity involved with carving and feasting, the Asmat were lost. “I was convinced that without the art Asmat would collapse” (Alphonse Sowada, personal communication). Sowada encouraged the Asmat to begin carving again very soon after the ban started that terrified them. At first, they played with forms not typical in their traditional art, like free form birds. The missionaries encouraged them to continue making their traditional forms
also, but to do it quietly. Full feasts, therefore, were not encouraged, as they were large affairs that required months of preparation and could not be easily concealed.

In August of 1965, Sowada requested that traditional carvings be produced again, and he promised the people that he would purchase these carvings to protect them from the government. (Sowada 2002:54) The Asmat responded and began bringing carvings to sell at the mission, which were saved and later used to begin the museum. (Alphonse Sowada, personal communication) Crosier leaders in other areas of Asmat also helped to foster the recommencement of their carving. Fr A. van der Wow in Basim, Fr W Lommertzen in Pirimapun, and Fr Gerald Thaar in Komor and Kayirin all motivated their people and purchased the finished pieces for the future Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress. (Konrad, Konrad, and Winkelmann 1996:310)

In 1966, a new Civil Administrator was appointed for the Asmat region. Gunadhi was from Bali and very sympathetic to the Asmat’s need for ceremony. He, like many Administrators who would follow him, disagreed with the Government’s cessation of carving in Asmat. Many Civil Administrators were powerless on their own to make changes and were afraid to ask their supervisors for change. (Sowada 2002:54)

Sowada was very concerned about the apathy and lethargy he saw in the Asmat people without their carving. He explained to FUNDWI representatives that carving must resume in order to reinstill a sense of purpose and pride in the people. If FUNDWI could facilitate a market to sell Asmat carvings to the world, perhaps it would be easier to persuade the Asmat to do other work that would benefit the country economically. FUNDWI initially had no response to Sowada’s request, so he wrote and asked them to reconsider an Asmat art project. In November of 1968, another new Civil Administrator, Woerjanto, began working in Asmat. He
supported the return of carving and sent a memo to his government superiors supporting the FUNDWI art program. The idea was approved, and in December of the same year, FUNDWI sent Jacque Hoogerbrugge to begin organizing the project. (Sowada 2002:54-55)

As mentioned above, some of the missionaries began collecting cultural artifacts for preservation in 1964 and 1965. In 1969 upon his appointment to lead the Diocese of Agats, he requested that the other fathers and brothers in the area continue this collecting. Sowada hoped that the collection would be comprehensive enough that they could begin a cultural center and house the objects for the education and appreciation of both the Asmat and the world. While Frank Trenkenschuh was finishing his degree in Anthropology, he came to Asmat to study the culture and prepare for life as a Crosier father. Sowada asked him to prepare a proposal for the Agats museum while he finished his studied at the University of Colorado. (Sowada 2002:55)

**UNESCO Projects**

UNESCO, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, initiated a program to produce carvings in the Asmat region. This program was called FUNDWI, Fund of the United Nations for the Development of West Irian. (Van Arsdale 1978: 135) Mr. Jacques Hoogerbrugge arrived in Asmat December 26, 1968, to begin organizing the program. Hoogerbrugge, a Dutch art dealer, stayed in the area of Agats and went out in a mission boat to patrol the area and acquire carvings from various villages. The mission assisted in packing and shipping the carvings Hoogerbrugge obtained back to Europe for sale there. (Trenkenschuh 1982a:35) To increase marketability of the carvings, Hoogerbrugge “encouraged carvers to alter their style to suit the average buyer” (Schneebaum 1976:67).
Since FUNDWI was set up as a commercial interest rather than a program to preserve cultural tradition, the Indonesian government thought it was wonderful. (Schneebaum 1976:69) As soon as the fall of 1969, Biwar Laut began making *bis* for FUNDWI. Trenkenschuh called it the “feast of the new *bis* pole,” as the purpose for the carving was very different from that before the ban (Trenkenschuh 1982b:36). The ban, though never officially lifted, was overlooked when the government discovered they could benefit economically from the sale of Asmat carvings. (Schneebaum 1985:27)

In 1969 Hoogerbrugge again returned to Asmat to begin another UNESCO funded program, the Asmat Handicraft Project. (Hoogerbrugge 1973:25) It was organized by Hoogerbrugge and was meant to be turned over to the Indonesian government at some point, who “had a monopoly over all sales and purchases of carvings” (Schneebaum 1976:72). The general feeling about Asmat art as seen by UNESCO is easy to understand when one sees the bureaucratic link of departments. When handed over to the Indonesians, their Department of Small Industries, named Perindustrian, would run the project. This department was located economically under FUNDWI, which reported to Forest Products, which in turn reported to the International Labor Organization. UNESCO obviously did not consider this an artistic venture. (Schneebaum 1976:75) After Hoogerbrugge finished organizing the program and had shipped many pieces back to Rotterdam to sell, he turned it over to Indonesia in 1972. (Schneebaum 1976:67,76)

The Return of Feasting

The Asmat yearned to return to their feasting ceremonies after years of absence. The Crosier missionaries believed that they could be performed without the violence formerly associated with
them, and lobbied on behalf of the Asmat with the Indonesian government. Finally in 1970, the
government relented and agreed to a Sago Grub feast. They were not aware that such an
undertaking is not just one large meal. The Asmat make a celebration of every part of the feast,
from the felling of sago trees so that the grubs may mature to the day when the grubs are finally
brought into the village for eating. (Trenkenschuh 1982b:36)

Also in 1970, the Bupati from Merauke requested many *bis* poles be made for him to sell,
but did not want the Asmat to perform the feast associated with them. The Asmat were
confused, as they could not comprehend the making of the *bis* without the associated
celebrations, so the Bupati finally gave in and allowed it to take place. (Trenkenschuh 1982b:36)
This hesitant permission from the government allowed traditional art forms to slowly reemerge
in Asmat society. Between 1974 and 1980, the Indonesian government slowly began to accept
carving again in Asmat. The ban was never officially lifted, but the officials began to “disregard
the injunction against traditional feasts” (Sowada 2002:56). Luckily, many of the master carvers
and leaders of feasts were still alive to continue traditions and teach new generations the process.
By the time Sowada witnessed another feast, it had been almost twenty years since the last.

In early 1975, the government agreed to let the villages reconstruct *yeus*, but only one per
village, rather than the many that had once existed. The villagers were greatly excited and began
the feast cycle for the building of a new *yreu*. As they began to use the ritual houses again and
revitalize their culture in other ways, the government feared that they were using these meeting
houses to plan head hunting raids. In response to this fear, the new *yeus* in Atsj were burned
down. (Sowada 2002:57)

Between 1980 and 1990, the government organized major logging projects. The Asmat
men and women were expected to work for the government all day for small wages. Although
by this time feasting was informally allowed, the people no longer had time to prepare or
perform the ceremonies necessary to complete the feast cycles. They now had to request time
off from work to keep their traditions alive. (Sowada 2002:58)

The Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress
Bishop Sowada, in 1969, conceived the idea of having a museum in Agats to preserve Asmat
culture and tradition during the ban, when the mission was scrambling to preserve all that it
could. Bishop Sowada officially proposed the museum and sought funding in 1970 as a
counterbalance to the Asmat Handicraft Project. Since the Project was a purely economic
venture, he wanted a reason for the Asmat to preserve their traditional carvings and not give
them up for the “tourist art” they had began making for the government to sell. Sowada
envisioned the museum as a “center for education” with lectures, slides, film, and tape
recordings from all areas of Asmat, thereby keeping safe not only their art, but their songs,
stories, and memories. (Schneebaum 1976:77)

The funding was granted by the John D Rockefeller III Foundation and building of the
museum was swiftly accomplished. The Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress opened August
17, 1973. In July 1976 the museum began an art and composition contest for the school children
of Asmat. Agats High School students began making baskets and carvings to market through the
museum at the request of museum visitors, who wanted to take home a souvenir of their trip to
Asmat. (Trenkenschuh 1977:70,78)

The museum was well received by the local people. Asmat young and old visit the
museum and speak of times past. They see it as a place where the spirits dwell, an ucu. Ucu
refers literally to the roots of the banyan tree where the spirits live. (Biakai 2002:66)
The most well-known contribution to culture by the museum began in October of 1981, at the first Festival of Asmat Art and Culture. This annual competition challenges the Asmat carvers to be inventive and refined in their carvings. All entries are judged and each division’s winner is purchased by the museum to be displayed. Many art dealers and art lovers from around the world make the trek each year to see the new forms and purchase works to take back home. Besides enticing the Asmat with fame and fortune from the contest, the area-wide participation also fosters inter-village camaraderie, something unknown to the villagers in former times of war. (Biakai 2002:67)

In the second year of the contest, how easily influenced the Asmat could be in their artistic interpretation was clearly shown to the Crosiers. The first year’s overall winner was a three-dimensional image of a mother and child. The second year, a majority of the carvers all made mother-and-child portraits, as they believed that is what the missionaries wanted. The contest’s hosts had to explain very clearly that they were looking for the best quality and innovation, not a specific arrangement. (Virgil Petermeier, personal communication)

Because of political strife in the area and the inherent danger to visitors, no contest was held in October of 2001. The locals were extremely disappointed, as they had designed and planned their carvings all year. This beloved festival has helped to keep carving as a tradition and also inspired the people to be creative and not fearful of response to their artwork. (Alphonse Sowada, personal communication)

The annual contest concerns more in Asmat life than just the quality of carving. It also aims to balance the continuation of culture and the time the people spend working for logging companies. Logging takes much time and energy away from carving and practicing traditional
It also takes away the wood sources the Asmat use to produce their carvings. (Biakai 2002:66-67)

Asmat Today

Artistic Adaptation

Materials

Before the Indonesian government banned carving and feast, every Asmat man carved everyday objects. (Smidt 1993b:47) They mostly used soft wood cut from the local forests, as it was easy to carved and suited to their needs. They carved many different types of forms including canoes, paddles, spears, shields, sago bowls, small ancestor figures, bamboo horns, drums, and bis poles. Even the simplest items often were adorned with the heads of ancestors to watch over the living while they went about their day to day duties. Wow-ipits, or master carvers, would complete or lead the projects on large, ceremonial items, but it was common for many men to participate in different types of carving.

During the active ban period, the men continued to make the items used in daily living, but without the spiritual tie of human figures or other decoration. Some dared to carve traditional items, but kept much of the subject matter and materials the same as before. After the ban started to be overlooked, the carvers were easily influenced by demands and many specifics about carving changed.

Ironwood, known as such because of its extreme durability after drying, is actually one of a number of trees that are red or yellow when cut, but dry to a hard, dark brown finish. It had historically been used for items that needed to be very durable, such as canoe paddles or long spears. After art making resumed, the carvers were asked to make traditional forms from this hard, heavy wood so that carvings would be more durable for transport. Because the wood’s
pores close tightly once it is dry, it does not take the traditional Asmat pigments well. The powdered pigments, when mixed with water, rely on the porosity of the softwoods to draw them in. The Asmat began, therefore, to simply polish the ironwood carvings instead of painting them. (Smidt 1993b:48)

*Style*

The stability of dry ironwood also led to new art forms. Canoe prows, the decoration on each end of the canoe, had become very popular with dealers. If a dealer found a prow that he liked, he would simply ask the Asmat to cut it off the canoe and sell it to him. This caused problems for the Asmat, as the prows contained spiritual symbols that protected them on river journeys. In 1960, H. von Peij, M.S.C. suggested to the locals that they produce a complimentary form to the canoe prow that would be easier for people to take home with them. (Konrad and Sowada 2002:125) The carvers invented a new style to take the place of the canoe prows, called *ajour* carvings. The overall shape of the *ajour* carving is a long rectangle, resembling the prow or *cemen*. (See Appendix, Fig.35) The common filigree pattern combines with human figures to form an aesthetically appealing carving that is easily transportable and sturdy. The ironwood allows for finer, smaller open work designs than does the softwood, as the softwood breaks so easily. (Schneebaum 1985:51)

Before the ban, the Asmat had already begun to adapt their art for tourists and dealers. In 1960, Hoogerbrugge noted a “decline in quality” because of too many people carving for profit. (Hoogerbrugge 1973:28-29) Many men took advantage of this opportunity to make money, and not all were skilled carvers. In Omanesep “one [carving] after the other showed the effects of hasty craftsmanship stimulated by the white man’s knives and curio interest” (Rockefeller
1967:162). These lower quality works were still purchased, though, because of the high demand for Asmat art. (Schneebaum 1976:74) By 1973, after carving had resumed, he noted that the carving “represents a healthy continuation of the traditional arts and crafts” (Hoogerbrugge 1973:29). Sago bowls, usually made in the form of small canoes and decorated with the head of an ancestor looking into the bowl to bless the contents, changed in 1973. Tourists wanted the ancestor’s head to face backward, toward the decorated bottom of the bowl, so that they could be hung on the wall as a decoration. The Asmat obliged, and another change in form was born. (Hoogerbrugge 1973:29)

Another new form spurred on by dealers was the larger ancestor figure. Ancestor figures are denoted by their lack of a cemen, as seen in the bis poles. They are also usually much smaller than bis. Gerbrands noted in 1961 that the size of these figures was increasing. Up until then, they averaged 130cm in height (51.2 in). Starting in ’61, Gerbrands saw them as high as 255cm (100.4 in), for a single figure. He also noticed a brand new form, two ancestors stacked on top of each other, as seen before only in the bis. (Gerbrands 1993:130) Schneebaum reports seeing these stacked ancestor figures first in 1980. Government officials asked the Fajit river people to make “ancestor poles” (bis) from ironwood. Because the ironwood trees have no projecting buttress root, the carvers could not make the cemen traditionally found on the bis pole. This request, then, produced the stacked figure. (Schneebaum 1985:50)

The Asmat also began producing carvings solely for sale. In addition to the aijour carvings discussed above, Schneebaum also notes what he called “pseudo-ancestor figures” (Schneebaum 1985:53) These were probably smaller and less easily breakable than the large tradition versions, much like the small statues seen today. Small shields, made as plaques to be hung from the wall, were also seen in the 1970s. Schneebaum calls both of these new forms
“airport art,” as they were the perfect size to put in a suitcase and ship home. (Schneebaum
1976:76) Konrad and Sowada report that the mission collected the last human form carved by
the people of Unir Sirau in 1973. From then on, the people chose to only make carved panels,
similar to small shields, for market. (Konrad and Sowada 2002:172)

Other innovative forms were inspired by the church or the carving competition. The
Asmat now regularly carve crosses and religious scenes, such as the Madonna and child. Three-
dimensional genre scenes are a more recent development. They first appeared in the October
contest and depicted images such as women fishing and a man standing holding a spear. Small
_bis_ poles have even been carved so that they may more easily be shipped back to the purchaser’s
country. (Smidt 1993b: 51)

__Traditional forms__

Not only were the traditional forms changed by the many facets of outside contact, but their
ceremonies were changed as well. After the ban on art and feasting was forgiven, the whole idea
of many of the traditional feast had to be modified to fit Indonesian law, which forbade warring.

Before contact, Asmat artistic style was set. Their human figures were abstract, yet
easily recognizable. They had a wide range of symbols and motifs that were understood by their
people. Once the Asmat began making _bis_ again after it was again allowed, they incorporated
more realism than they had before. The human figures were more naturalistic and less stylized,
adding such details as lips and toenails. (Virgil Petermeier, personal communication) This
addition of observation and realism was directly tied to western influence and what was expected
of such forms by the outside world. (Greg Poser, personal communication)
War-related items are still produced, such as shields and spears, to the curiosity of outsiders. The Asmat continue to carve these items, though they are no longer used to their original purpose. The people no longer go on raids, so they no longer need spears to kill their enemies, nor do they need shields to protect themselves from retaliation. The memory of those warring times still lives in the oldest Asmat generation. Though the church has taken away much of the fear of raiding, the Asmat are still vigilant. They’re not far enough removed mentally from those fearful times to feel safe without having weapons at hand, so the forms continue to exist. (Virgil Petermeier, personal communication)

Another major complication of selling traditional art is just that: the carvings leave the culture. Asmat carvings are intertwined in the spiritual aspect of daily life, as discussed in the Art and Religion in Asmat chapter. How can the Asmat let the representation of their loved ones, the ancestor spirits, leave to be kept in another part of the world? In the case of the *bis* pole, they had to change their way of thinking about the *bis* cycle. Formerly, once the final *bis* ceremony was complete, the pole was returned to the sago fields, destroyed, and left to rot—for the ancestor spirits contained within to fertilize and bless the future sago crop. By selling the *bis*, this part of the renewal process stopped.

Now, once the *bis* feast has reached its culmination, the Asmat see themselves as through with their relationship with the *bis*. Its purpose for the ceremony is completed and the spirits of the pole have been sent on to *Safan*. The pole is now just a carving, not a participant in the culture. By this way of thinking, the Asmat were able to reconcile their beliefs with selling the pole, now bereft of its purpose. (Dave Gallus, personal communication)

The area now referred to as Bismam has mostly kept their traditional styles true. Becembub has kept the original forms, yet they have refined the carving techniques and have
begun to use color more freely. The western part of Safan is now known for their *bis* carvings, which have come to the area by diffusion. In Simai, Amborep was one of the first villages to carve *bis* again in 1974 after carving began again. After that celebration, they refrained from carving for many years because they were trying to be modern and western. They have now resumed some of their traditional rituals. (Konrad and Sowada 2002:132,118,160,170)

The village of Atjamutsj, where Michael Rockefeller and René Wassing studied, is today artistically dead. Kenekap, Aramatak (formerly Citak), Yupmakcain, and Bras have also ceased to produce artwork. Senggo, a village in Yupmakcain, planned a secret feast around 1996 and had to ask the Museum in Agats for drums to use, as they were still prohibited to possess ritual objects. (Konrad, Konrad, and Winkelmann 1996:311)

Merging of beliefs

A good example of how the Asmat were able to take in and envelop culture change is described in the following story, told to me by Fr Virgil Petermeier:

As the 50th anniversary of the Agats Diocese approached, a committee of Crosiers gathered together to discuss how they should celebrate. As a way to involve the Asmat directly, they decided to ask the various parishes to collaborate in carving a large cross that would be used in the anniversary feast. Cooperating in this way, the cross would visit each parish individually and each area would have a chance to put their ideas, or cultural signature, on the cross. The people agreed and the cross began to travel around Asmat.

The Asmat immediately invented rules for the care of the cross, such as how it was received into the village. Upon entering the village, the cross had to be carried in a certain way
and enter the *yeu* straight and horizontal. Some villages even restructured doorways to ensure that these rules were followed. If for some reason there was no way for the cross to enter the *yeu* correctly, then the local pastor could hold onto it and guide it into the ritual house. Apparently since the pastor gave his blessing to the cross entering the *yeu*, even though it was not in the correct position, the Asmat resolved the inherent problem in breaking the rules that they had set.

When the cross came to Father Virgil’s parish, centered in Ayam, he noticed that though other preparations for the feast were going on, the locals seemed unconcerned about carving the cross. He did not want to force the people to do the carving if they did not want to, but he was curious what they were thinking. One day after Sunday services, he approached a group of men and said, “I know that the diocesan committee in Agats were the ones that thought this up [the collaborative cross]. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to. Nobody’s forcing you to do this.” The men responded that no, they did want to accept the cross. Fr Virgil then asked why. The men said that the cross represents God who is coming back to see what happened to his word that was proclaimed. It also represents Zegwaard, the first missionary that came. He is coming to see what he got going so many years ago. The cross also represents his rowers, the old chieftains, and the people that brought him around. The cross represents Jesus who died on it.

Fr Virgil was shocked by their responses, as they had produced these ideas on their own. They had taken what the Crosiers thought was a simple idea and added multiple layers of meaning and ritual to it. Not only did the Asmat incorporate traditional ideas with the carving and care of the carving, but they crossed old feud lines in order to continue the procession of the cross.

Ewer and Ayam were historically enemies. Many raids had gone back and forth between the two villages, and even after the raiding was stopped, they never got along well. The Ewer
people were responsible for transporting the cross to the next village, which happened to be Ayam. They loaded the cross onto canoes and began paddling upriver. No fewer than 30 canoes accompanied the party to deliver not only the cross, but a large Bible. Ayam received them with great hospitality. As the people from Ewer came on shore, “It was a radiant site...I mean a really rousing dance all the way from the river’s edge to this yeu. If it wasn’t muddy [before], it was muddy afterwards because the feet really churned this whole area.” They took the cross directly to the yeu. A long line of men from Ewer followed, bring bags. They began emptying out bag after bag of fresh clams. As guests, this was their contribution to the feast celebrating the arrival of the cross. The women then entered with large jugs of coffee, sago, fish, and other foods.

These two village, former sworn enemies, were able to embrace the words told to Fr Virgil about the cross representing God and his appointees. The Asmat wanted to show that they had embraced Catholicism and changed the way God and Zegwaard had hoped.

The entire yeu was filled with people celebrating, including the village mayor. While the cross was in the Ayam yeu, a group of people, along with the mayor, slept beside the cross to keep it company. The mayor decided to travel with the cross to ensure its care while it was in his area. “He was about a month out of his house, just going with this cross.”

When the cross visited the village of Yaosokor, the local people added another facet to the care of the cross. They began to fan the cross. “They made little fans out of pandanus leaves. Cute little fans. They were sewn on the edges and everything.” Ten people had to fan the cross at all times. They could be old, young, men, or women, as long as the cross was fanned continually. Fr Virgil saw the cross again later in Bayun. Again they were talking about fanning this cross. He spoke with the local pastor, and the pastor said, “I think they think it’s a dead person and usually you would fan a dead person to keep the flies away.” Fr Virgil asked one of
the old villagers from Bayun. He responded, “Well, so that Jesus doesn’t sweat.” As simple and frivolous as that may sound to us, the fanning was a symbol of respect, as they hold Jesus in high regard and want to take care of him.

In the small village of Pau, the locals asked if they could hold Sunday services in the *yeu* since the cross was visiting and they had just rebuilt their ritual house. Fr Virgil consented to the unusual request and held mass in the *yeu*. After the services were finished, whole families began going to the cross and praying in front of it. When they had finished, they would take the children and rub their hands on the cross. The mother would rub her hands on the cross and then on the faces and down the bodies of her children, as though transferring some power from the carving to the children.

As the cross progressed through Asmat, the lore surrounding it and the power ascribed to it grew and grew. By the time it was being transported to Atsj, the cross had a life of its own. Again, many canoes escorted the cross as it was carried along on motorized boats. A large ship was coming from the sea towards the group, and they waved to the ship to stay behind them, as a ship casts a large wake. They were afraid that if the wake hit their smaller boats, they would be tipped over or flooded and the cross could be lost. The ship ignored them, went along beside them, and the wake splashed all of the boats, though the cross was not lost. That night the ship sank. The next day, two more ships came to pull the first ship out of the river and float it. They were unable to bring it up. The Christian and Islam members of the crew proceeded to the *yeu* to make a contribution at the foot of the cross. The next day, the ship floated again. When the cross was next transported, the same ship was on the river. The crew spotted the cross and decided it was best to pull the ship to the side. The entire crew went ashore and waited for the cross to be moved. “They weren’t taking any chances anymore.”
Areas Outside of Asmat

Much of Papua, formerly Irian Jaya, is pastored by Protestant missionaries. Unlike the Crosier missionaries who came to Asmat with open minds and anthropological backgrounds, the Protestants sought to completely convert the native peoples and erase all traces of their former culture. Bishop Alphonse Sowada witnessed this personally in 1970 on a trip to Komoro. (personal communication) As of 1973, Asmat neighbors Sentani, Humboldt Bay, Mimika, and Marind-Anim no longer had any art either. (Hoogerbrugge 1973:30)

In the highlands, the Dani not only had their art and ceremonies taken away, but were left with men now impotent in their society. As the men’s primary purpose in life before outside contact was warring and the ceremonies associated with it, after the suppression of their culture, they no longer have a purpose and are now lost in their lives. The Dani have had a cultural rebirth of sorts, performing partial ceremonies without the component of war, but these are only for the benefit of tourists. (Greg Poser, personal communication)

The Mimika, to the west of Asmat, are led by the Franciscans. Though Catholic, the Franciscans in this area were not concerned with the blending of traditional culture and Christian religion as were the Crosiers. They had lost all of their carving and traditions until very recently, when they were inspired by the October Festival of Asmat Art and Culture held each year.

Freeport Mining Company, who originally came to New Guinea to exploit its natural resources, has become an advocate for the native peoples and sponsored this reinvention of culture and ceremony. (Greg Poser, personal communication)

The people of the Sepik River, across the border from Asmat in Papua New Guinea, are one of the few other groups on the island to maintain their artistic traditions. The art from Sepik River was heavily collected by museums and art dealers, even before Asmat art was discovered
by the western world. They changed their carvings to suit the tastes of the buyers and sold their older traditional goods when asked. This became their downfall in the world market, however, as high-class dealers were not interested in new art. They wanted old art that had a patina, showed age, and had a cultural connection to the people. The new style, brought about by these very same buyers, was not good enough. As of 1973, the PNG government has stepped in to work as agents for the Sepik people in selling their work. A new group of lower-class dealers has come in to buy these new, market-driven carvings. (Hoogerbrugge 1973:30-31)

On the Downing collection trip in 2001, Jerry Martin went up the Ewta River and into the Protestant-controlled Auwju area in an attempt to collect art objects from them. From the river, they saw no evidence of carvings, not even any yeu. When they stopped at a village and talked to an old man, he said that there was no traditional culture, no art, left. He asked them if they would like to see the village most sacred treasure. Martin of course said yes. He brought a bundle wrapped in leaves, and as he slowly unwrapped it, they saw that the priced object was a porcelain insulator from an electrical pole. (White, C 2002:28)
CHAPTER 5
THE PLACE OF ART IN ASMAT RELIGION

Asmat culture is still seen by many to be primitive. If they had never experience outside contact, they would probably still be carving with stone tools and existing solely from the jungle. Since the forest and rivers provide everything the Asmat need to survive, they never sought anything else from outside their land. In this chapter, I will examine the western view of primitive art, outline Asmat religious beliefs, and show how Asmat art constitutes a visible representation of these beliefs. It should here be noted that the explanations of original Asmat religion were recorded by Catholic missionaries. When reading descriptions of historical Asmat beliefs, I assume that they were interpreted and recorded correctly. It is always possible that cultural bias already existing in the minds of the recorders could have influenced their interpretation of Asmat cosmology.

Art in Primitive Societies
There has long been debate about the use of the term “primitive.” The original usage of the term was derogatory in nature, from two different schools of thought. First, the Degenerist view of society saw all of the earth as deteriorating from a pinnacle in the past, such as the level of the ancient Greeks or Egyptians. Thus, the cultures that were the furthest away from this high society were those who had lost their grip and slipped down the anti-evolutionistic slide. The other school of thought that influenced this idea was Unilinear Evolutionism. They believed that all cultures go through certain pre-prescribed stages on their way to civilization, which corresponds to the aesthetic tastes currently enjoyed in the western hemisphere. By this outlook, “primitive” societies had not evolved as far we had, or had stopped evolving because they were
mentally incapable. The other contribution of the Evolutionists to this situation is the idea of the “living fossil.” As they believed all cultures passed through similar stages, those who were lesser developed were examples of what more advanced civilizations were like previously in their growth.

In the realm of non-western art, other terms have been offered, but there are also problems with these. “Native” art is problematic because every culture is native to somewhere. “Aboriginal” art, though usually applied to the art of Australian and New Zealand tribes, actually refers to any prehistoric people of the world. “Nonliterate” art implies that illiterate people produced it, and illiterate people appear in all societies. “Tribal” art well suits art made by tribes, but not all primitive people belong to tribes. (Wingert 1962:6-7)

The Unilinear Evolutionists used the term primitive to degrade cultures that were underdeveloped. They imply that the artwork is inept, technically crude, or of an inferior quality (Wingert 1962:5). That the untrained westerner sees primitive art as rough, barbarous, or “an inaccurate or gross misrepresentation of the human form” does not aid our goal of making the terminology more accurate (Wingert 1962:10). “Primitive art may be defined most succinctly as the high art of low cultures” (Fraser 1962:13). In his definition, Fraser cannot break away from the Victorian idea of primitive peoples being of a low cultural station. Perhaps the best definition by these early thinkers is that primitive art can be used “as a term denoting the art of primitive people, [for it] defines the art and in no way refers to kind or quality” (Wingert 1962:8).

I personally prefer the term ethnographic art. Ethnography refers to the study of the society and practices of a culture, so ethnographic art would therefore be the study of how art relates to the society and practices of a culture. This is not a judgmental term, and can be applied
to any society, not just primitive ones, although it does include their work. In this sense, ethnographic art could refer in our culture to any decorative utilitarian object that we possess. Decorative potholders, jewelry, and even crucifixes would be seen as ethnographic art. This is especially effective in the comparison of primitive art if our decorations and motifs are culturally specific.

When European artists saw some of the first primitive works brought to the west, they were inspired by them. “Negro sculpture,” after being seen by artists during this time influenced Cubism. (Fraser 1971:28-9) Although he later denied it, African art’s influence on Picasso can clearly be seen in his 1907 painting, Les Demoiselles D’Avignon. (Fraser 1971:32) The primitive, specifically African, art that the Cubists viewed was neither as pure nor free as they believed it to be. Actually, these portrayals were a common, traditional form from the society that produced them. (Fraser 1962:15).

The western world has long believed that art should portray idealized nature. (Fraser 1971:26) Fraser interprets fine art in three ways. 1. “Styles of these [more advanced] societies focus on specific visual problems, on complex political institutions such as the state or on religious ideas alien to primitive thought” (Fraser 1962: 14). 2. They “use rare metals, massive stone masonry, and imported materials” (Fraser 1962:14). 3. Advanced culture artists have achieved “the realistic representation of the visible world on a two-dimensional surface” (Fraser 1962:14). This idea of realism being the pinnacle of representation was transferred onto primitive art and caused it to be succinctly judged for its apparent simplicity. But just because primitive art is abstract does not necessarily mean that it is simple. Before the Hellenistic period, when the Greeks focused on individual portraiture and produced idealized form, they had modeled abstracted portraits. “They had first to interest themselves in man as a general type
worthy of accurate representation” before they bothered to attempt realistic portrayal of the human figure (Wingert 1962:25). Primitive art focuses on “the ancestors, the spirits, or the gods,” and not on other men, but this does not mean that he has no need to tie his art work to realistic portrayal (Wingert 1962:25). Abstraction is indeed a step in the progression of learning to represent reality. It is also a conscious choice made by artists after they have completed their classical training and are finding their own style.

Art in primitive society is inextricably linked with religion, society, economy, and politics. In these small organic societies, art plays a role in almost everything they do, from decorated food preparation tools to sleeping mats to items of ritual use. Although each group has its own artistic traditions, as noted by the Historical Particularists, it is common that neighboring communities may have similar styles. These similarities from cultural contact do not invalidate the individual progression that happens in each group. Luckily for the anthropologist, these unique traits, after thorough study, make it possible to distinguish cultures from each other through their artistic representation. (Wingert 1962:8-9) Fraser insists “that art be viewed as an integral element of the society that produced it” (Fraser 1966:10). This sentiment is mirrored by Wingert in that it is important to understand the culture to truly appreciate the art. (Wingert 1962:9) Because their art is intertwined in their culture, the two things cannot be separated and still be have the art be intelligible.

Through the influence of materials, his environment, and spiritual guidance, the artist has extracted symbols for his culture. During progression of style development in primitive culture, the entire community is aware of the process and the meanings of the symbols. (Fraser 1962:29) Because of this integration, the symbolic meaning of each piece is apparent to the members of that society, although we as outsiders may not understand. This happens in all cultures.
Christian art is a good example. Someone with no knowledge of the Bible or Christian doctrine would not recognize a man with a sword fighting a dragon as St. George. Only within the cultural context can the full meaning be extracted.

Diffusion of art styles plays heavily into anthropologic theory. An isolated group is more likely to have an unchanged or uninfluenced art style. (Fraser 1962:30) So if the anthropologist stumbles into people in the jungle and their art is like nothing he has ever seen, it is possible that they have had limited contact with cultures other than their own. In the same vein, the oldest survivals of styles represent the longest unchanged societies, so when there is outside influence it is very easy to detect in the artwork. In these situations where the same styles have been used for many years, how thoroughly the new element is integrated into the older styles can help gauge the length of time it has been in the artist’s repertoire. Certain patterns are maintained, even through changes by diffusion. Many times in ritual, primitive peoples call in a spirit to a piece of art. If the ancestors or spirits do not recognize the design, they will not know where to go, and the ritual cannot be completed. (Gunther 1968:79)

Gunther sees primitive art’s purpose as a way “to secure a relationship with the supernatural world” and “a method of communicating in a pre-literate society” (Gunther 1968:112). The anthropologist’s responsibility is to make connections between art and culture, and present them in a way that is understandable to outside observers. Anthropologists have methods to uncover the vast and elusive elements involved and are sympathetic to the culture’s goals, unlike treasure seekers. We must remember that “what an object means outside the culture in which it was created is secondary, the important matter is the attitude within society” (Gunther 1968:113). The anthropologist, in Gunther’s eyes, must be “concerned with art as an
index of the diffusion of culture and of historic contacts between cultural groups” (Gunther 1968:113).

Asmat Religion
The Origin Myth of Fumeripits

Fumeripits and his friend Mbuirepits lived on the Sirets River. One day they went across the river to fish and found two women who were hunting for shellfish.

The men and women agreed to sexual liaisons, and in the midst of their festivities, Mbuirepits realized that Fumeripits was having sex with his girlfriend. Mbuirepits became very angry and took the canoe back across the river, leaving Fumeripits to find his own way home.

At dusk as the two women and the rest of their group readied to return home, Fumeripits’s girlfriend Teweraot wrapped him in nipa leaves and hid him in the bottom of her canoe. As the women set out, the river became very rough and Teweraot’s canoe tipped over. Since Fumeripits was wrapped in leaves, he could not swim to shore and was swept away by the current.

He finally washed ashore on a small island where a group of birds found him. At first, the birds could not decide if the man was alive or dead. After further investigation, they found that he was dead but very ill. They flew to ask the sea eagle, War, what they should do. He said that he would come to visit the man and that he wanted the other birds to procure some medicine for him to use in reviving Fumeripits.

War used a stick to apply medicine to Fumeripits’s joints, ankles, knees, hips, shoulders, and forehead. Fumeripits did not stir. War was afraid he had used the wrong medicine, so asked the birds for a different one. He again applied the new medicine to the same places on
Fumeripits’s body, and when he touched his chest, the man woke up. Fumeripits screamed and then asked what had happened. War told him, and then they introduced themselves.

Fumeripits went back to the mainland and announced, “All men will discuss what I am about to do.” He build a yeu and house right there and began to carve statues shaped like men and women. Next he took out his drum and began to play it. The carvings came to life at once. When they could not see anyone, they asked, “Who has been beating this drum?” They did not find out, since Fumeripits ran into the forest once they came alive. Fumeripits continued this process, moving west. He birthed the Asmat, Mimikans, Kaimana, and Surajabaja. (Zegwaard 1982b:31-32)

Basics of Asmat Religion
The Asmat had a purely animistic religion until missionaries introduced Christianity. Edward B. Tylor defined animism as “the belief in spiritual beings”. This belief includes the idea of a person’s soul, ghosts, gods, and demons. He believed that events common to the human experience gave birth to animism because people tried to logically explain unusual happenings such as dreaming. Dreams can be so real that the dreamer believes he or she rose in the night and experienced fantastic or terrible occurrences. When the person awakes, his housemates can easily assure him that he never moved. Thinking about a logical answer to this problem, it is easy to see how animistic societies develop the idea of a wandering soul. If part of a person is able to leave the body while asleep and wander, possibly even possessing another person or animal, dreams are explained.

This same idea of split souls or spirits can also be transferred to inanimate objects. If people and animals have souls, then it makes sense that so too should plants. Having a soul in
life then allows the plant, such as trees, to possess a soul in death. Many animistic cultures call spirits into their carvings, or as Tylor called them, “fetishes.” (Barnouw 1978:218-219) Although the Asmat have accepted and intermeshed Christianity into their native religion, many of these animistic beliefs still exist and are best seen in the practice of their rituals and feasts.

Each Asmat person has four different souls or spirits within him. The first spirit is called *yuvus*. Only humans have this spirit and we are born with it. *Yuwus* is associated with emotions and is located beneath the navel. The second spirit, *ndamup*, is the wandering spirit. This is the spirit responsible for dreaming, as it can wander while the person is asleep. *Ndamup* can play tricks on others and also possess animals. If this spirit wanders too far or gets lost while the person is sleeping, the person can go into a coma or even die. The third spirit is *ndet* (also called *mbi* in some areas of Asmat). This spirit comes into the body once a child has passed his first birthday. They believe that the spirit is too strong for a small child if it should enter the body too early. *Ndet* gives personality and uniqueness to a person. The last spirit that a body possesses is *samu*. *Samu*, though rarely seen, causes aberrant behavior. If this spirit shows itself, the person will probably become very ill or die soon. (Sowada 1996:67-68)

The Asmat also believe in three separate spirit worlds. The first is the world of the living. The dead occupy the other two. Once a person dies, his *ndat* goes on to limbo. In this state, the spirit is able to come back and visit the world of the living. If the spirit is angry from unresolved revenge, it can cause problems for the villagers. The last world is the world of the ancestors, or *safan*. (van der Zee 1996:13) *Safan* lies beyond the rivers and the sea at the place where the sun sets. (Smidt 1993a:25) These worlds of the dead and the ancestors seem to equate to the Catholic beliefs of purgatory and paradise, as limbo is a place of unrestful spirits and *Safan* has “abundance, peace and happiness for ever” (van der Zee 1996:13) The world of limbo dips
into both Safan and the living world, but the beings that populate limbo cannot stay in either place. (Helfrich 1996:42)

**Reciprocity, balance, and repayment**

The Asmat are not an historically altruistic people. They believe that all debts should be paid, whether this entails reimbursing food to a neighbor who shared their meal in a time of need, or killing someone related to the man that killed a family member. In the case of a person killed by extenuating circumstances, the dead’s spirit will remain in limbo until this balance is restored. (Sowada 1996:69-70) Keeping the spiritual powers of all things in balance is what drives Asmat life and ritual. Without magic, rituals, and ceremonies, this goal would be impossible to attain. (van der Zee 1996:11)

**Head hunting**

The balance in a village can be disturbed by bad magic and wrongful deaths. As lives are lost, the entire life force of the community dwindles. The people can feel the anxiety of the imbalance, and once it reaches a certain level, they must begin the process of rebalancing. A head hunting raid is the best way to achieve this renewal of life force. Once the raid is complete, the warriors bring back the bodies of the dead for ritual consumption. The meat of the body is split up among various members of the village, but the brains are saved for the oldest, most esteemed men. They mix the brain with sago, cook it, and in this manner consume the power of the dead person. (van der Zee 1996:12) Eating a powerful warrior that was killed during the raid transfers his fierce power to the cannibals. (Greg Poser, personal communication)
After the initial celebration of eating the flesh of the enemy, the skulls were cleaned and kept for use in initiation rituals. In the past young boys, upon their rite of passage, would be given the skull of an enemy, a trophy skull. He would keep the skull with him night and day, even sleeping with his head upon the skull. By this closeness, the spirit of the dead warrior would bond to the young man. The child initiated by such a skull and given the dead person’s name is welcomed by the village where the dead person lived. These ties allowed the initiate to work as a peace negotiator between villages, but also allowed him to work as a spy. He would be allowed into the village to find out the names of the villagers and decide when would be best to raid the enemy village to take more heads. (Konrad 1996:77)

Men, women, and children have all been carved as part of a *bis*. It was not unusual during head hunting times for women and children to be killed in raids alongside the men. As long as a child was old enough to have a name, once his *ndet* had come into his body, then it was seen as appropriate to kill him. Anyone killed in a raid must be known by name to the enemy. Without the name of the dead, the skull could not be kept as a trophy and used in initiation ceremonies. (Konrad1996:76)

The Purpose of Ritual

Barriers between the three worlds in Asmat religion can only be weakened or lowered by the performance of specific rituals. Ritual is “an externalization of their [the Asmat’s] philosophy of life” (van der Zee 1996:8). By performing these rituals, the living can guide spirits from the world of limbo to the world of the ancestors, thereby pacifying restless spirits and renewing balance. Carvings that are made for a specific purpose in a feast no longer have cultural meaning once the feast has been completed. (Konrad, Konrad, and Winkelmann 1996:304) *Bis* spirits,
specifically, leave the pole after the end of the bis ceremony because balance has been restored and they have gone on to Safan. (Virgil Petermeier, personal communication) The Asmat are still cautious with these used carvings, not only the bis. Where they once returned the carvings to the forest to decay and renew life, the Asmat now welcome the selling of feast objects once their purpose is finished, as the buyer will probably move the object far away from the area. In the collection of the American Museum of Asmat Art, I witnessed old shields that had been broken before they were sold. If the shields had the depiction of an ancestor perched at the top, part or all of the human figure was removed before the piece was allowed to leave the area. This is because spirits of fierce warriors are called into newly carved shields to bring the user protection and greater success in battle. The ritual objects are seen as dangerous once their function has been fulfilled, so whether they are returned to the forest to rot or taken to the western hemisphere, the Asmat prefer that they are removed from areas they daily frequent. (Konrad, Konrad, and Winkelmann 1996:311)

Wood plays a powerful role in Asmat ritual. It is the most abundance natural resource for building in the area, and the soft woods were easily worked with stone tools before the west and metal entered the Asmat world. The story of Fumeripits ties the Asmat people to wood, as Fumeripits created the Asmat from wooden carvings and the beat of his drum. In addition to believing that they were born from wood, the Asmat also strongly identify with the trees in form. The tree’s roots are a person’s legs, the trunk his body, the branches his arms, and the fruit his head. It then follows that all human representations carved by the Asmat are made of wood. These carvings are an essential tie between the worlds of the living and the dead. Each statue is made for a spirit whose death requires revenge. (van der Zee 1996:11)
Bis carving process

Just as the bis feast is made up of specific rituals completed in a specific order, so is the ritual for carving the bis. There are three main sections in a bis pole. Each section is completed, save for the painting, before the next section is begun. The three sections and their main features are as follows (Kuruwaip 1984:20):

1. *Cemen*, or *bis* penis. The *cemen* is the projecting wing that emanates from the groin of the topmost figure. The main pattern is of curving, filigree design that incorporates small human heads, whole human figures, birds, and other Asmat symbols. The human heads represent the enemies slain in battle by the main figure represented in the bis. Birds and couscous tail designs reinforce the power of the warrior (formerly head hunter) depicted in the carving and also bring power to the entire pole.

2. *Bis-Anakat*. This is the main central portion of the pole that contains the large human figures. These carvings are naturalistic, having all the body parts of a real person. They are posed in various ways, depending on the number and type of figures on the bis. As described in detail below, the figures are decorated with a number of designs and adornments.

3. *Ci* and *Bino*. This is the lowest portion of the bis when it is erected. The *ci* is the small canoe carved at the base that assists the dead on their journey to Safan, which lies beyond the rivers and the sea. Occasionally a passenger is carved in the *ci*, and often food is placed in it to aid the dead in their travels. The *bino* is the pointed end that in some areas of Asmat is driven into the ground to stand the pole upright.
Art in Asmat

Art in Asmat does not exist only to provide aesthetic pleasure. Carvings assist the Asmat to understand how their religion affects every aspect of their life. There is no difference between the sacred and the profane in Asmat. Utilitarian objects are carved with the images of spirits that watch over daily activities. Ritual carvings invoke the spirits of the dead to rebalance life force in the community. “They express their reverence for the mythical (and, to them, real) ancestors by means of their carvings, their art. By their art they make a concrete act of faith in the abiding presence of the ancestors.” (Kuruwaip 1984:12) Ritual and carvings provide reassurance that aid from the spirits is always available to the living. “Through ritual, the Asmat make what is hidden present and visible” (Sowada 1996:68,69).

*Cesscuipit* is the word equivalent to artist in the Asmat language. This term includes drummers, singers, and myth-tellers as well as carvers. (Konrad, Konrad, and Winkelmann 1996:313) The term *wow-ipit* is the specific word for a master carver, and translates literally to “carving man.” *Wow-ipits* have special powers that enable them to call spirits into carvings. (Konrad, Konrad, and Winkelmann 1996:306) *Wow-ipits* are so revered that during major carving projects, the family that has commissioned the pole provides for the needs of his family so that he may concentrate solely on his work.

In the western world, the creator of a work is credited as maintaining intellectual or artistic ownership over the piece, regardless of who owns it. In the United States, we have exhaustive copyright laws to protect these exclusive rights of the maker. In Asmat, the owner or commissioner of a carving is seen as more important than the carver. Though the carver completes the work to model the image of the spirit, the spiritual relationship between the
carving’s spirit and the owner is the strongest and most important part of the carving process.

(Gerbrands 1993:121)

Any carving that is in human form has a spirit called into it, regardless of its specific function. Thus there is no separation in the Asmat mind between traditional and contemporary art forms. Spirits are not bound in space and time as are living people. They can exist in many different carvings and also exist in limbo and Safan all at the same time. This parallels the idea of the wandering ndamup spirit, explained above. (Alphonse Sowada, personal communication) Because the ndamup spirit inhabits the carving, a living person’s image is never made. Just as a ndamup that wanders too far while a person is sleeping can kill him, so could the person die if his spirit also dwells in a carving.

The Function of Carvings in Asmat Society

1. Carvings symbolize the actual presence of the ancestors.

2. Carvings are signs to the ancestors that their malicious deaths have not been forgotten and will be avenged. This helps the living to avoid being punished by angry ancestor spirits.

3. Carvings are memorials to the dead.

4. Carvings represent security and salvation, as the carvings keep the ancestors present in the world of the living to bring protection.

5. Carvings are intended to be beautiful to please the spirits.

6. Carvings show the inner emotions of the Asmat and their awareness of the presence of the ancestors in their daily lives. (Kuruwaip 1984:12)
The iconography of Asmat symbols

The making of a symbol is a simple process. One simply draws or carves a motif, especially an abstract design, and then assigns a real-world meaning to it. If a people then takes this symbol and imbues it with richer, culture-specific meaning, the symbol then takes on iconographic meaning. For example, in Asmat society, there is a symbol that represents the praying mantis. (See Appendix, Fig. 36) The symbol is drawn as a person sitting with their knees drawn up and their arms bent so that the elbows touch the knees, much as in the fetal position. (Cherry 2004:14) This symbol has been anthropomorphized by merging insect and human shapes and enculturated into the old head hunting culture so that the iconography of the symbol stands for a fierce warrior or spirit who has taken many heads in battle, much as the female praying mantis bites off the heads of the male after they have mated.

The problem with the study of iconography in Asmat culture is that the cultural meaning of the same symbol motif can vary among villages; sometimes even among groups within the same village. (Schneebaum 1985:17) The inconsistency in meaning of symbols is extended to different names for the same design or variations in the same basic ceremony, such as the bis feast. Some symbols do not even exist in one area of Asmat, while they may be central to cultural beliefs in a different area. (van der Zee 1996:27) There are, however, a few motifs that occur regularly in the bis poles across all of Asmat.

Common markings on the figures in the bis include C-shapes and long S-shapes found on the torso, the upper and lower arm, and the upper and lower leg. (See Fig. 11) Interpretations of these markings vary. Konrad notes that these “lines of strength” represent ritual scarifications found in body decoration (Konrad 1996:292). Kuruwaip mentions curved lines carved and painted to represent the long bones of the arms and legs (Kuruwaip 1984:18). Lastly, Gerbrands
says that the S-shape comes from “a line on the human body that runs from the nipple over the breast-bone, follows the ribs until it touches the hip-bone and then turns back via the pubic bone towards the navel, thus encircling the abdominal cavity, the most vital part of the body, making a symbol for “body,” (Gerbrands 1967:108). These S-shapes are often seen marked on the figures exactly as Kuruwaip and Gerbrands describe.

I am skeptical concerning the representation of ritual scarifications, as descriptions of such scars do not occur in any other area of Asmat research. Also, in studying photographs taken since first western contact with the Asmat, I have never seen such markings on any of the Asmatters. The only documented scars that I have found are small round marks that look like burns covering the torso and arm of a woman of the Emari Ducur area in Konrad’s 1996 publication. (See Fig. 34) These scars were made by an attempt to cure an illness that the woman suffered. (Konrad and Konrad 1996b:199) There is also ritual cutting in the emak cem feast celebrated by the Joerat group. During this initiation ritual, young men are cut just above the breast bone and also above the back of the knee during the rebirthing ceremony. Later at the sibling initiation rite, both girls and boys are also cut just above the back of the knee. Neither of these cuts results in the patterns found in the artistic representation. (Konrad, Konrad, and Biakai 1996:258-259) Another possible explanation for bis scarification markings concerns village in-fighting reported by David Eyde in 1966. He wrote that it was not unusual for fights between men or a man and his wife to occur, sometimes even resulting in the killing of the wife with an axe. “Wounds are welcome, for the scars from them are evidence of bravery, which must later be shown to the spirits. On the images of the dead [carvings] one also finds many scars”(Eyde 1966:85).
It is widely communicated that the word Asmat means “we the people of the trees,” when it actually merely means “we people,” as opposed to “we animals” or “we plants,” (Wassing 1993:29) The Asmat do relate themselves very closely to the trees, as is shown in the story of Fumeripits (see The Place of Art in Asmat Religion). Building on man being analogous to a tree, the Asmat have built an entire canon of animals that symbolically are synonymous with fierce warriors, specifically head hunters and cannibals. If a tree’s trunk is a man’s body and its branches are his arms and legs, then the tree’s fruit becomes his head. Any animal that eats fruit of the tree is seen as equal to a head hunter and used to represent him in sculpture. Thus the king cockatoo, the couscous, the flying fox, the hornbill, the cuscus and many other birds and animals are added to carvings to imbue the carvings with additional strength. The Asmat also don the fur or feathers of these animals to transfer the animal’s strength and prowess into themselves. (van der Zee 1996:24)

As previously mentioned, the Asmat believe that certain art forms possess great amounts of power. Ritual objects such as the wuramon and the bis can be so powerful that they can cause illness or abnormal behavior in a village if handled improperly or attempted by a carver who is not strong enough. The Asmat feel the same way about some specific symbols. Matjemos, the carver made famous by Adrian Gerbrands, was requested to carve the figure of a mantis on a bamboo horn for the researcher, but he did not have enough courage to render such a dangerous motif. He was afraid that the power of it would overwhelm him and he would become ill. Since he so desired to please Gerbrands, he asked Ndojokor, and older carver in the village with more power than he, to carve it for him. (Gerbrands 1967:159)
Meaning of color and adornments

The last step of making any Asmat carving is the application of color and decorations. There are only three colors used in the decoration of Asmat art--white, red, and black. This color scheme is used on every type of carving, including bis poles, canoes, drums, shields, and even bamboo horns. Not surprisingly, each color has its own specific usage and meaning. Other attached decorations, such as sago frond tassels, skirts, arm bands, earrings, and nose ornaments are often added to human carvings.

White is the base color of many carvings and represents the skin on human figures. It is made by burning clam shells over a fire, then crushing them into powder. In inland areas that do not readily find shells, white kaolin clay is used instead. Production of pigments sometimes varies by the maker. To make the white of the burnt clam shells “whiter,” some add crab shell or various plants. (Schneebaum 1985:34) The calcium carbonate particles are then mixed with water and applied to the carving with a brush made of shredded leaves. (Smidt 1993bc:49) Historically, this “lime” pigment was also thrown at enemies to befuddle them and give strength to attackers. White pigment was and is still also used as body decoration. (Schneebaum 1985:34)

The red pigment used by the Asmat initially starts out as yellow ochre clay, dug from mud along the banks of the rivers. As it only occurs upstream, toward the inland villages, it is a product that is traded to the coastal peoples. After squeezing out excess water, the balls of ochre are placed in a fire and left to oxidize. This oxidization process causes the iron in the clay to further break down, essentially speeding up the rusting process. As more oxygen bonds with the iron, the color becomes red. After cooling, the lumps are broken up and mixed with water in preparation for application. Some Asmat choose to mix the pigment with the red sap from a
local tree to intensify the color and better adhere to the wood. Red paint is used on carvings to
denote long bones or tattoos and also to fill in decorative motifs. (Smidt 1993bc:49-50) It is also
used to separate the white and black paints, as in the line between hair and skin. As used in body
decoration, red is painted around the eyes to mimic the natural coloring of the black king
cockatoo. Any red on the body is seen as attractive by the Asmat. The Asmat use red on many
other carved objects, including canoes, which are purported to be faster if painted with red
stripes. (Schneebaum 1985:36)

Black is the simplest color to produce. It is made from the ash from ordinary wood fires.
After mixing the ground charcoal with water, it is applied to of the carved human body to
indicate hair. It is also used on the raised outlines of designs and motifs, both on human figures
and other carvings, that have previously been filled in with red. (Smidt 1993bc:50) Black is
used on the body as both decoration and medicinally. It can be applied in powder form to the
forehead, nose, and eyes. If it is first mixed with dried lizard fat and then put around the eyes, it
makes men look more attractive to the women. As a remedy, charcoal is rubbed into small cuts
or onto painful parts of the body to ease discomfort. (Schneebaum 1985:36)

Many other natural elements are combined into decorations to adorn carvings. On
carvings of humans, one may see sago fronds, feathers, beads made from seeds, and bird skulls.
Many times, these items are in the form of ceremonial dress worn on the body by the Asmat.
Dressing the modeled ancestor figure in appropriate clothing shows respect as well as bringing
strength to the carving and the represented spirit. Rattan arm bands, feather skirts, and earrings
or necklaces made of sago fronds and seed beads are very common. The sago fronds are often
rolled into a wound string that is left loose at the ends, producing a tassel. These may be used as
is or strung with off-white coix seeds, also known as Job’s tears, red abrus seeds, or the black
heads of the Capricorn beetle. Feathers from the sulphur-crested cockatoo (Smidt 1993bc:51),
cassowary, and even chickens are sometimes attached to these bundles with tree sap. Outside of
body and figure adornment, sago tassels are often seen on the sides of shields and woven bags.
In my effort to correlate culture change and artistic change, I have examined and analyzed 43 *bis* poles from several sources. In person, I have seen and recorded information on poles from the Lowell D. Holmes Museum of Anthropology at Wichita State University, the Rockefeller Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the American Museum of Asmat Art in St. Paul, Minnesota. To supplement this information, I have also studied *bis* photos published in Gunther and Ursula Konrad’s 1996 and 2002 works, as well as the *bis* from the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde as shown in Dirk Smidt’s 1993 work.

The periods of manufacture for these *bis* range from 1954 to 2001. The culture areas represented by these carvings are: Becembub, Bismam, Safan, Simai, and Unir Sirau. Using these analyses, I will differentiate certain styles and forms of *bis* by culture area and show changes of representation and content over time. For ease of discussion, I have chosen to split the *bis* into two time periods, old and new. The old group is the *bis* that were carved between 1954 and 1981. The new group consists of the remainder, carved between 1981 and 2001. The reason to split the group at 1981 is because that is the year in which the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress began its annual carving contest. Although outside influence had already taken place in Asmat carving before then, the contest gave the artists new impetus to invent new and varied styles, including in the *bis*. In this section I will explain my methodology of analysis, describe styles particular to specific culture areas, and show evidence of formal change due to culture changes. All figures referred to in the text are located in the Appendix.
Methodology

To physically describe the bis, I will rely upon the critical analysis methods of art historians. The first level of artistic meaning is “Primary or natural subject matter, subdivided into factual and expressional” (Panofsky:28). This first look at the artistic piece in question gives us basic information pertaining to shapes, line, color, and the object(s) included: the form. From this level we understand that the image is a human being, animal, or object. We also can infer a mood or emotion from the scene. A smiling child would thus equal both human being and happy.

The second level of critique is “Secondary or conventional subject matter” (Panofsky:28). This level allows us to further identify the formal inventory of the piece. Each subject in the artwork now has a meaning rather than just an identification of form. This cultural meaning is known as iconography. With additional cultural information, we can identify our smiling child as the baby Jesus because of his halo and the fact that he is sitting on the lap of the Virgin Mary.

The last level is “Intrinsic meaning or content” (Panofsky:30). This meaning includes “the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion—qualified by one personality and condensed into one work” (Panofsky:30). Here we can include the cultural significance of the artwork and the attitudes of the general populous. To continue with our smiling baby analogy, if the baby and his mother are portrayed in a peaceful, solemn way, it is probable that the common person finds the Virgin Mary and Jesus positive religious influence and is reverent of them. If, for example, the pair was pictured at the top of a large trash heap, perhaps the artist and his people find no solace in or admiration for the holy pair but rather see them as negative influence.
Asmat Culture Zones

The whole of Asmat is divided into twelve culture areas. This division is based upon culture and dialect differences between the areas. In the past, more so than now, these divisions also somewhat divided artistic regions. The northern regions were known for their mask and wuramon feasts; central Asmat for its bis feasts, and the south for its crocodile carvings.

Currently the regions and dialects stand as such: (see Map of Asmat, Appendix, pp. 37-38 for correlations) Asamur dialect—Aramatak (area 10), Kenekap (5), Yupmakcain (11), and Bras (12); Asmbat—Becembub (8) and Bismam(7); Asame—Emari Ducur (1) and Bras(12); Asamat—Joerat (4), Safan (9), and Simai (6); Asamae—Unir Epmak (2); Asomor—Unir Sirau (3). (Konrad 2002:114)

Variation in style

War shields from Asmat and other New Guinea groups have already been exhaustively analyzed. From this work, style areas have been defined and shield iconography is well understood.

Although I do not have near enough information to analyze bis design as thoroughly as the shields have been, I have been able to correlate unique styles to specific areas, and even to time periods. The following are some examples of the regional variation found in the bis.

Showing teeth and tongues

Sticking out of the tongue in Asmat society is phallic symbology. Men do this towards women to invite them into sexual relationship. If gestured towards a man, it is done to show dominance. This gesture can cause fights between men, as the gesturing man considers the other to be
weaker, or considered female. (Konrad 1977:88) Sowada adds that this aggressive gesture is seen only in the bis of specific areas. (Alphonse Sowada, personal communication)

Representation of teeth and protrubant tongues in bis occurs mainly in Omanesep and Ocenep, with one example from Buepis. Although Omanesep and Ocenep lie in different cultural regions, Becembub and Safan respectively, they are located quite near each other. Perhaps this similarity between villages of different dialects comes from a conflict relationship between the two. If they villages were enemies, they would definitely see each other’s carvings and possibly adapt their canon of symbols so that the enemy would clearly understand the meaning. These carvings are very fierce. The figures represented look angry and aggressive. It is easy to see that they were meant to intimidate the village’s neighbors. (See Figs. 3, 4, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26)

Figures holding or standing on trophy heads

As previously explained, the heads and skulls of enemies played a large part in the spiritual and ritualistic practices of the Asmat. Men never physically wore trophy skulls, though the women of the head hunters would take the lower jawbones and wear them as necklaces. Men would, instead, wear Syrinx shell in front of their lower abdomens to show that they were powerful head hunters. Eight of the old poles show this in the carving. One even depicts the Syrinx shell placed in front of a figure’s groin. (See Fig. 23 for Syrinx shell, Figs. 3, 4, 5R, 22, 23, 24R, and 25 for heads)
Eyes red and black

This is a variation particular to Atsjamutsj and Amanamkai. (See Fig. 1) The eyes are painted black and then abrus seeds are attached to them with tree sap or beeswax. In an example from Amanamkai, the eyes are first painted red before black pupils are painted in.

Praying Mantid motif—*wenet*

The praying mantis, or *wenet* as it is called in Asmat, is a well-known symbol of head hunting. Often, the form of the mantis is combined with the head of a human figure to make the symbol. Many of the *bis* examined here contain this powerful motif, used to commemorate the dead and exemplify their considerable power as head hunters.

(See Figs. 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 23, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33)

Banyan tree roots

Gerbrands reports that the meaning of the banyan root design in Omanesep does not represent an ancestor. In Amanamkai, the figure-eight design represents a specific female ancestor, with genitals carved at the crossing point of the figure-eight. In Omanesep, the design consists of one figure eight, while in Amanamkai, the design is one and a half figure-eights. (Rockefeller 1967:126) In the *bis* represented here, only one from Omanesep has one and a half of the designs. The other two have two each. In a Biwar Laut pole, one figure-eight design is carved. It is true that these designs are not a particular spirit. Instead, it is the representation of a safe place. Before burial was common practice for the dead, a body could be placed in the roots of the banyan tree to decay and return to the earth. Frightened warriors would climb into banyan
roots to hide, for the spirits would protect them. (Konrad and Sowada 2002:125) (See Figs. 3, 4, and 5R)

“Support Pole”

Two *bis* from Amborep, Simai, are included in my study group. These particular poles were used in a ceremony in 1954. (See Figs. 24L and 27) The carving style is peculiar, as it seems the human figures are attached to another pole that runs up behind them, though they are actually carved from one tree trunk. The figures are carved very differently from other areas in Asmat also. The heads are very small and pointed at the top. The limbs are carved as though attached more like animal legs. The pose of the arms and legs looks like the figure should walk on four legs rather than two. There are also several supportive connections that run from the limbs to the “support pole” behind.

Heavy-style *Cemen*

The *bis* from Biwar Laut, all from 2001, are characterized by a “heavy” look to the *cemen*. This “heaviness” comes from the thickly-carved filigree and wide colorwork particular to the region. Gerbrands notes in 1967 this style and how it is also seen in poles collected from Omanesep and Yow. (Rockefeller 1967:142) All three villages lie within the Becembub region along sea coast.

Men with Hats

On *bis* from Syuru, Bisman, two from Aorket, Safan, and one from Yow, Becembub have male figures wearing hats. The shape of the hat strongly resembles the lower jaw bone of a human, with teeth pointing up and also the cuscus fur headpieces adorned with abrus seeds. They are
painted black like the hair. This is a new development, not seen in any examples from before 1981. (See Fig. 11)

Squatting Figures
The mortality rate associated with childbirth used to be very high in Asmat. Carvers invented a form to represent spirits that protect only women who had died in childbirth. They are depicted as “tucked or squatting” at the top or base of a sculpture. (Konrad and Sowada 2002:125) Fig. 5L is an excellent example of this.

Upside-Down Children
In three of the poles, children are depicted upside-down, being held by their ankles. In two of these, women hold them. The other is held by a man in a bis that only contains the child and two men. (See Figs. 5, 6, and 19)

Multiple Cemens
In the collection of bis analyzed for this project, I have found evidence of poles with more than one cemen. These are all from the Sawa area in Unir Sirau. They are all recent in manufacture and two of them are associated with churches in the village. (See Figs. 28, 29, 32, and 33)

Change Over Time
Wenet
There are eight examples of bis made before 1981 that contain the wenet design. Many of these also contain the strong head hunting symbols of teeth and tongues showing and standing or
holding heads. Again, these clusters center around the Omanesep/Ocenep/Buepis region. (See Figs. 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 23, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33)

The *wenet* figure fades out in *bis* made after 1981, except for the village of Sawa, Unir Sirau. Sawa is not an area that originally made *bis*. They are in the northern area, known for masks and *wuramon*. They seem to have adopted the stylistic elements of the *bis* that were pleasing to them and added their own variation. I do not know if *bis* feasts accompany the carving of these poles in the Unir Sirau area. The addition of more than one *cemen* is a completely original phenomenon. Sawa’s *bis* are a notable example of cultural diffusion and adaptation.

Holding or Standing on Trophy Heads and Teeth and Tongue Showing
In the examples available, the appearance of trophy heads does not continue in the new *bis*. The baring of teeth and tongue are also gone in the new *bis*. These variations, along with the *wenet* design, were perhaps so strongly tied to head hunting that the Asmat chose to discontinue their use after their main purpose ceased to exist.

Upside-Down Children
This is an uncommon depiction of a child in *bis*. After seeing this form associated with the figure of a woman who had died in childbirth (See Fig. 5L), I believe that the upside-down child represents a child who died during or right after childbirth. This representation would thus be logical, as the attitude of the figure follows the position of a baby during a normal birth. (See Fig. 6) This position is also repeated in the initiation right in the north of Asmat, where the *wuramon* is carved. The initiates are held by the ankles and dropped onto a padded area,
simulating the motions of birth, thereby rebirthing their spirit and becoming adults. This could explain the reason that the child in Fig. 19 is held by a man rather than a woman.

Banyan Tree Roots
In the new bis, the banyan design is changed. In Figs. 9 and 13, bis from you, it is easily seen that the banyan design has grown from its original place between the lowest figure and the base. In these two poles, the banyan design encircles the human figures and extends from the top of the base to just under the cemen.

Amount of Scarification
In old bis, there tended to be proliferous scarification marks. They were also carved very widely and intensely colored with red. In new poles, there are considerably fewer marks and they are thinner, thus not containing as much pigment. The pattern of scars was also more diverse in the old poles, whereas the new poles mainly contain the S-shaped and C-shaped marks. (See Figs. 11 and 26)

Depiction of Women
The depiction of women in bis is not new, as it was acceptable to kill women during raids. (Alphonse Sowada, personal communication) It was not as common in the old poles as it is in the new, however. In new poles, women are depicted as pregnant (See Fig. 12), and even nursing babies (Fig. 19).
Adherence to Traditional Bis Arrangement

According to Gerbrands, traditional bis were composed of the same order of figures. Each bis figure was named after a deceased family member. The top figure was a prominent man. The next figure down was his chief wife. The human figure on the cemen or the third figure down was of one of their children or a tertiary wife of the chief figure. (Gerbrands 1967:145)

Earlier, I discussed why the owner of a carving is considered more important than the carver. It was also a cultural rule that a carver was not allowed to carve his own family. The spiritual connection would be too strong for him to carve his own people. By consulting the collection notes of the Lowell D Holmes collection, I found that the Asmat are now breaking their own guidelines.

In bis 2001.10.632 and 2001.10.685 (Figs. 10 and 16), the carver is also the owner. In 2001.10.864 (Fig. 15), the main figure in the carving is the artist’s father. In other poles, the main figures may be the owner’s family, but the artist will place one of his family members as a lower figure. This is yet another way that the Asmat are adapting to their relatively new situation in the world.
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Asmat avoided contact with the outside peoples for centuries before missionaries and governmental rule came to change their world. They were first directed to give up the warring and cannibalism that was an integral part of their lives and spiritual beliefs. After they refused to change this violent tradition, the government banned all ritual activity, emphasizing this point by burning all ritual carvings and the village ceremonial houses. This prohibition changed Asmat life in every way. They no longer had any legal way to rebalance the forces in their spiritual lives. Since ritual encompassed nearly every aspect of life, they were lost without the permission to carve human representations and in danger of losing their history and traditions.

Beginning in the 1960s, Crosier missionaries who were lead by a Bishop trained in anthropology, intervened on behalf of the Asmat in an attempt to preserve their cultural heritage. The missionaries urged the Asmat to continue carving, even if it did not include traditional uses, in an effort to preserve artistic ability in the carvers and revitalize the communities. Over many years, the mission vied for UNESCO monies and programs to make Asmat art known and valued around the world. Only by this economic worth would the Indonesian government ever appreciate the Asmat and find value in them as a people.

In the late 1970s, the Indonesian government finally allowed carving and feasting again in Asmat, although they never rescinded the law against them. During this time, the Crosiers had appropriated a grant to build and open the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress in Agats as a repository of Asmat tradition and history. Many carvings salvaged by the missionaries since they were first banned were added to the museum collection, the only carvings that survived the
burnings. The museum also initiated an annual carving contest that has added more vitality and creativity to Asmat art productions since 1981.

The performance of ceremonies and rituals always has been and still is integral to Asmat society. Their historical religion is animistic in nature and relies upon retribution and rebalancing to appease the dead spirits, who can affect the living. In former times of head hunting, this rebalancing was accomplished by return raids, taking a life for a life. The spirits killed in the incoming raid would then be avenged by the death of those responsible for their murders. This cycle kept the spirits appeased, but also cast a constant fear on the people.

By taking away the warring and introducing Christianity, the missionaries offered the Asmat a future without fear. The Asmat then were left with rituals missing the vital component of head hunting. Their task was to find a way to preserve their ritualistic traditions without violence. They accomplished this quickly and also adapted their thoughts about the production of ritual objects, which allows them to sell the carvings to outsiders without endangering spiritual imbalance.

Analysis of *bis* poles supports the idea that culture change has direct and identifiable effects on artistic iconography and representation. Several commonly used symbols in early Asmat carvings have disappeared with the cessation of head hunting. They have adapted the form to commemorate and honor the dead rather than to avenge the spirits.

**The Future of Asmat**

Asmat is changing even more rapidly today than it was 60 years ago. Alcohol has been introduced and is causing problems much like those in Native American populations. Agats has occasional electricity, telephones, and internet. There is even a new hotel being built there to
better accommodate tourists. Logging and mining continue in the area, depleting resources the Asmat have used for centuries. There is a new proposed sago palm glue-making project that would severely limit Asmat food and feasting resources. (Konrad, Konrad, and Winkelmann 1996:309)

As the Asmat continue to grow and change in the world, they have so far managed to maintain their cultural identity. With the help of culturally sensitive missionaries, an amazing amount of their culture has been preserved while the culture of those surrounding them has dwindled and died. The Asmat are still a vital people and I hope that they, as well as outsiders, continue to value the importance of their history and rituals.

Recommendations for Future Research

I feel that the stylistic clusters I have discovered while working on this project would be interesting to continue with a wider sampling of bis. Small ancestor figures and other objects carved with human figures should be included in this stylistic comparison. By making note of these culture-specific styles, diffusion in the area could be studied further.

Investigations into the history of the cultural areas surrounding Asmat should look for the appearance of the bis form. Carvings and likeness of human figures exist around the world. The phallic wing and the spiritual embodiment of the carving are the two aspects of the bis that are the most unique. Perhaps links to neighbors, in addition to the linguistic ties already researched, might be discovered to aid in following the original path of diffusion.

Deeper study of Asmat cosmology as it pertains to anthropological theory would be a prudent progression in research. The belief that each person has four spirits within them can be compared with the argument of nature versus nurture. The yuwus, which arrives in a body at
birth, can be seen as the natural spirit or personality of the child. As this personality develops, through nurturing, it then changes into ndet, the spirit that provides personality at a year old or later. This progression of human development is clearly defined by the Asmat concepts of these spirits.

The origin of the Asmat as a people is not clearly known. Archaeological evidence of societies such as this are not well preserved, as they use building materials that break down quickly, leaving no record. Through the myths of the Asmat, they believe that they came from further upriver, perhaps in the Mimika area or in the highlands. Linguistic similarity among the tribes of New Guinea has suggested local migratory patterns, but perhaps further biometric investigations could better place the Asmat in the world, tying them to another known group such as those located in Australia or Africa.

My last suggestion for further research reaches into all Asmat carvings, including the bis. As told in the Cross Story above, certain new forms have been adopted to specifically represent the church. New forms, such as the mother and child, are taken directly from Catholic examples of Mary and Jesus. It would be interesting to investigate the art that has been made to use in the churches, rather than the carvings made for traditional use. Perhaps they have a different canon or iconographical interpretations used for these carvings. Perhaps they have adapted forms and symbols already in use to fit this new story telling.

It is also vital that someone continue taking oral histories of both the Asmat elders and those who have lived and worked in Asmat. There is still so much about Asmat ritual and belief that we do not know. While the history of the area is still alive in the oldest generation, we anthropologists must try to preserve it for the future generations of Asmat.
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Fig. 1
Bis from Atsjamutsj, Becembub 1961
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
“ Ithaca bis”
Fig. 2
Ithaca Bis from Atsjamutsj, Becembub 1961
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
“ Ithaca bis”
Fig. 3
*Biis* from Omanesep, Becembub 1961
Photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 4
Bis from Biwar Laut, Becembub 1969
Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress
69.067.1
Taken from Konrad 2002 p.119
Fig. 5
Bis from Biwar Laut, Becemhub 1970 (left) 1971 (right)
Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress
70.114.1 (left), 71.177.1 (right)
Taken from Konrad 2002 p. 122
Fig. 6
Bis from Omanesep, Becembub 1971
Konrad Collection A013
Taken from Konrad 1996 p.399
Fig. 7
Bis from Ambisu, Becembub 1978
Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress
78.012.1
Taken from Konrad 2002 p.123
Fig. 8
Bis from Omanesep, Becembub 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.629
Fig. 9
*Bis* from Yow, Becembub 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.631
Fig. 10
Bis from Yow, Becembub 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.632
Fig. 11
Bis from Yow, Becembub 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.633a
Fig. 12
*Bis* from Yow, Becembub 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.633a
Fig. 13
Bis from Yow, Becembub 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.634
Fig. 14
Bis from Biwar Laut, Becembub 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.683
Fig. 15
*Bis* from Biwar Laut, Becumbub 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.684
Fig. 16
*Bis* from Biwar Laut, Becembub 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.685
Fig. 17
*Bis* from Biwar Laut, Becembub 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.686
Fig. 18
Bis from Per, Bismam 1968
Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress
68.009.1
Taken from Konrad 2002 p.133
Fig. 18
Bis from Uwus, Bismam 1975
Konrad Collection
A005
Taken from Konrad 1996 p.385
Fig. 20
Bis from Ocenep, Safan (west) 1961
Photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 21
Bis from Ocenep, Safan (west) 1961
Photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 22
Bis from Ocenep, Safan (west) 1961
Photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 23
Bis from Ocenep, Safan (west) 1961
Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde
RMV 4104.2
Taken from Smidt 1993 p.102
Fig. 24
Bis from Amborep, Simai 1954 (left);
Ocenep, Safan (west) 1961 (right)
Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde
RMV 4104-1 (left) RMV 3242-1(right)
Taken from Smidt 1993 p.103
Fig. 25
Bis from Buepis, Safan (west)
Konrad Collection
A004
Taken from Konrad 1996 p.413
Fig. 26
*Bis* from Buepis, Safan (west)
Photo by Tobias Schneebaum
Taken from Smidt 1993, frontispiece
Fig. 27
Bis from Amborep, Simai 1954
Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde
RMV 3242-2
Taken from Smidt 1993 p.25
Fig. 28
*Bis from Sawa, Unir Sirau 1993
Konrad Collection
A118
Taken from Konrad 1996 p.358
Fig. 29
*Bis* from Sawa, Unir Sirau 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.879
Fig. 30
*Bis* from Sawa, Unir Sirau 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.881
Fig. 31
*Bis* from Sawa, Unir Sirau 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.882
Fig. 32
Bis from Sawa, Unir Sirau 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.897
Fig. 33
Bis from Sawa, Unir Sirau 2001
Lowell D Holmes Museum of Anthropology
2001.10.897
Fig. 34
Photo of women from Emari Ducur with medicinal scarifications
Taken from Konrad 1996 p.199
Fig. 35
Photo of Ajour carving in the shape of a cemen, Atsj, Becembub 1971
Konrad Collection
Y057
Taken from Konrad 1996 p.409
Fig. 36
Depictions of wenet, or praying mantid designs
Taken from Gerbrands 1967 p. 34
Fig. 37
Map of Western Asmat
Taken from Konrad 2002, inside cover
Fig. 38
Map of Eastern Asmat
Taken from Konrad 2002, inside cover