

**Cosmology and Colonisation:
History and Culture of the Asmat of Irian Jaya.**

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Abstract

This thesis offers a reanalysis of the ethnography of the Asmat of Irian Jaya in the context of the colonial encounter of the present century. The Asmat, a group of people inhabiting a large area of the alluvial plain of south West Papua, have a reputation for ferocity. In this thesis I examine Asmat cosmology by exploring the constitutive elements of the headhunting and cannibalism, which gave rise to the reputation for ferocity, and the woodcarving for which the Asmat are internationally renowned.

The analysis draws together two aspects of current anthropology. First I situate the ethnography historically and culturally. Second I examine Asmat cosmology which seem "strange" and constitutes the "other." Such examination forms the basis for the comparative exercise which characterises anthropology. The analysis may be divided into two parts which are integral to each other: (i) a consideration of the way that the Asmat are located in the colonial and global economic and social contexts (ii) an examination of the cosmology of the Asmat as it is evident in their everyday life and the ritual and mythic corpus.

The thesis is informed by a number of theoretical approaches which rather than conflicting are complementary. A reading of Foucault tempered by the structural analyses of Sahlins is the basis of the situating of the Asmat and their ethnography in the initial stages of the thesis. While Foucault is used to elaborate upon the way in which western knowledge is gained through power relations Sahlins perspective allows for the creative and productive potential of the people under study.

Asmat cosmology is redolent with the themes of death and regeneration and maleness and femaleness. The heady mixture of death, sex and creation permeates the ritual and mythic corpus and the related material objects but it also is vital to the subsistence activities of the people. The cosmology which supported the headhunting and cannibalism of the not so distant past underlies the subsistence activities of today. In analysing the cosmology I have used Castro, Levi-Strauss, Kapferer, Ricoeur and Schutz.

The final chapter of the thesis contains an examination of the conjuncture of the Asmat and a global culture which not only appropriates their art but also constitutes them in particular instances. In the conjuncture between the Asmat and global culture within the colonising processes of this century I argue that there is not only the obliteration of the culture of a people but also the possibility for its reproduction.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ii
Abstract	iv
Introduction:	1
Some Theoretical Considerations	6
Ethnography and History	6
The Conception, Dissemination and Reception of Knowledge	9
Difference	10
Postmodernism and its 'Critique' of Anthropology	11
Anthropological Theory and This Thesis	14
The Material	17
Structure and Theory: how the chapters come together	18
Chapter I: The View From Outside	24
Anthropology: Texts and History	26
Imagining West Papua	29
The Dutch: Tardy Colonisers	31
Reflection on Colonialism, a World System and West Papua	38
Making Irian Barat Irian Jaya	44
The Netherlands and The United States of America: A Resolution	47
The Dutch, the Indonesians, and the Exploitation of West Papua	50
Indonesia: A Place of its Own	54
Loosening Dutch Colonial Ties: A Busy Time in Asmat	56

Early Commentators on the Asmat	57
Later Commentators on the Asmat	66
Anthropology and The Colonisation of West Papua	68
A Productive Time of Turmoil: Ethnographically Speaking	69
Chapter II The Ethnographic Setting and the Social Organisation of the Asmat	76
Part A:	
Where Asmat Live: The Coordinates	76
The Land	83
Variations in the Terrain	86
The Problems with, and the Potential of, Swamps	87
The Houses	91
Some Demographic Considerations	99
Eyde's version of the day in the life of the village	103
Some Effects of Government Intrusion on Subsistence Activities	104
The Importance of Sago Production	107
Sago Production	109
Fishing	110
Hunting	111
Part B: Social Organisation	
Men's Houses and their Community	114
Marriage	118
Siblingship	120
<i>Pipsi</i>	122
Leadership	124
Canoes	128
Social Organisation and the Commentators	130
In Conclusion	132
Chapter III: Where Spirits, and Humans, Dwell	138
Asmat Cosmology and the Ethnography	140
Worlds Together and their Relationships	141
Linking the Spirit Worlds and the World of the Living	146
What's In Naming?	151
Understandings Implicit In One Aspect of the Everyday: Sago and Sago Production	155

<i>Bis</i> : the Ritual	160
<i>Bis</i> : The Origin Myth	169
Carving: The Making of People	172
Balanced Relationships	174
Chapter IV A Gendered World: An Accent on Men	178
Terror and Violence among the Asmat	179
Asmat and the War Machine	181
Personhood and Gender relations: A digression	183
Headhunting and Cannibalism	186
Opportunistic killing	188
The Headhunting Raid	191
Flesh and Sago	194
Male Initiation	197
The Body, the Universe and Maleness	203
Maleness through the headhunt and cannibalism	205
Chapter V A Gendered World: An Accent on Women	209
Academe and Sex/Gender	210
A Matter of Difference	212
Women as Mediators	213
Marriage and the Division of Labour	216
Multiple Marriage	219
The Making of Marriage	222
The Disposition of Women in Marriage	225
Women, Men and the Spirit World	227
Reproduction of a Gendered World	230
Women and Ritual	233
Gender Characteristics and the Behaviour of Women	236
Concerning Asmat Sexuality	240
Conclusion	243

Chapter VI On Meaning: It's Manifestations and Ramifications	245
Meaning and Anthropology	245
Anthropology, Narrative and Examining Cosmology	247
Two versions of a Myth	250
Asmat Song	260
The Song of the Red Parrot Woman	262
The Uses and Ownership of Song	265
Variations in Artefact Production	267
Meaning and Material Culture	270
Colour and Body Decoration	276
Skulls	278
Conclusion	279
Chapter VII Asmat Colonised	282
Dutch and Indonesian Colonisation and the Collection of Material	285
The Commentators and the Colonisation of the Asmat	287
Research: Management and Terms	294
Land and Logging	297
The Indonesian Nation State and the Asmat	298
Health	301
Education	304
Asmat Understandings Meet Practical Reason	307
An Asmat Response in a Colonial Context	311
Indonesian Administration of the Asmat	315
Conclusion	315
Chapter VIII Prevailing Images	321
Cosmological Underpinnings	321
Representations of the Asmat and Missionisation	323

Artefacts: a link to capital	326
Asmat Through Michael Rockefeller's Disappearance	329
The Display of Asmat "Art and Artefacts"	331
Images through Photography	334
Films and the Asmat	336
Cannibalism	338
Summary	339

List Of Figures

Chapter II

Fig. 1 the structure of the men's house according to Eyde.	95
Fig. 2 Warsekomen's ties	125

Chapter III

Fig. 3 Kuruwaip	148
Fig 4 Simpelaere	149
Fig.5 the Bis pole taken from Schneebaum (1990)	162

Maps

Introduction

Map 1. Taken from Schneebaum (1990:15)	2
----------------------------------------	---

Chapter I

Map 2.	33
Map 3. Taken From Modera (1828)	35
Map 4. Taken from Lorentz (1913)	37
Map 5. Taken from Knauft (1993)	63
Map 6. Taken From Trenkenschuh (1971)	64

Chapter II

Map 7. Voorhoeve's Map	80
Map 8. Mansoben's Map of the Village	98
Map 9. Zegwaard and Boelaars Map of Sjuru.	116

Chapter VI

Map 10. Artefacts from Schneebaum	268
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Plates

Chapter I

Plate 1.	41
Plate 2.	42

Chapter V

Plate 3.	238
----------	-----

Chapter VI

Plate 4.	271
Plate 5.	274
Plate 6.	332

Tables

Chapter I

Table 1 The History	25
Table 2 The Commentators	59

Chapter II

Table 3 The Products of the Region.	88
Table 4. Eyde's Table of the House Types in the Region	93
Table 5. Village Sizes	101

Chapter VI

Table 6. (compiled from Schneebaum 1990:30).	268
Table 7. (compiled from Schneebaum 1990:33)	276

Appendix A	344
-------------------	------------

Appendix B	348
-------------------	------------

Appendix C	384
-------------------	------------

References	386
-------------------	------------