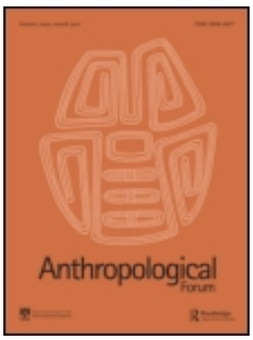

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Imagination behind Shape: The Invisible Content of Asmat Artefacts

Astrid de Hontheim[1]

For the Asmat people in West Papua, artefacts and body decoration are created for both aesthetic and spiritual purposes. Craftspeople add sacred components to comply with their ancestors' expectations, which are perceptible to their descendants. Body decoration acts on the self, affecting mood and health. My Asmat informants expressed their surprise when they saw some 'tribal'[1] art collectors avidly gathering 'pieces',[2] as if they hoped to capture the aura of the pre-contact Asmat. The most sought-after objects bear an ancestor's name and were involved in head-hunting or cannibalism. This article concerns some of the imagined contents of Asmat artefacts and how their status changes from the time they are made until their integration into Western collections, particularly those of Dutch and German collectors I interviewed in 2003 and 2004.

Keywords: Asmat; Art Collectors; Tribal Art; Head-hunting; Invisible Beings

The spectacular art of the Asmat has inspired many art lovers, museum curators and scholars of art history. Art collectors, in particular, are so eager to relate their objects to a symbolic content—imagined by Westerners or actually corresponding to the sculptors' declarations—that, in some villages like Per or Uwus, some Asmat carvers request payment per minute to offer these 'symbolic' explanations to foreigners, particularly to the American tourist yacht that visits the Asmat area every two to three years. This discourse does not necessarily match interviews with carvers chosen independently from the tourist context, despite the fact that there may be as many opinions on the topic as Asmat artists. Here I show how the Asmat use objects as mediators between themselves and their ancestors, the human and the non-human, the visible and the invisible, and how they adapt the imaginary content of artefacts to fit cultural needs constantly appearing in their changing world. I also explore the extent to which art collectors re-create an invisible content for 'tribal'[2] artefacts in order to integrate them into their collection.

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Objects and Head-hunting

Besides their art, which can be found in major Western ethnographic museums and collections of 'tribal art', the Asmat are known for their past head-hunting activities, which were written about extensively in the American press after Michael Rockefeller's death in the area in 1961. Until its last known occurrence in 1983, head-hunting was generally organised within core kindred groups, because its major purpose was to obtain ancestors' names (rather than actual heads). These names were 'freed' by cutting off the related head, which consequently became available for ritual use by the kindred group's young initiates. In other words, attackers and the attacked knew each other. Warfare generally concluded after the anticipated number of heads—and associated names—was achieved. It was commonly known in advance who was susceptible to losing his head, with those bearing the names of prestigious ancestors being more likely to be attacked. As Lévi-Strauss (1968, 225–6) wrote, 'sacrifice seeks to establish a desired connection between two initially separate domains … by first bringing together the two domains through a sacralised victim … and then eliminating this connecting term'. In the Asmat case, kindred groups were the enemies, and head-hunting went along with the consumption of the flesh of the beheaded warriors. The initiate did not ingest flesh, but he replaced the deceased in his family and integrated his identities by means of the head. To raid a group of kin implied that those attacked would also conduct their own raid when they needed names and heads during their own initiation period. In a sense, it was a name exchange, enacted by taking turns in taking heads.

Asmat names are numerous; their number varies from person to person, and may change several times during a lifetime. The Asmat elders involved in traditional activities or with the most prestigious physical ancestors would be given more names by the elders. The decision to change somebody's name belongs to the elders, the tradition holders (*wair'ipitsj*) who sit in the *jeuw* ('ritual house'). Some names can be cumulative, others just change and the old one is given up, such as names referring to land rights. To bear a land name means to represent the land and to do one's best to make it thrive. If the elders decide that there are not enough representatives of a particular area, they may designate somebody who represents another land (who bears another land name) considered less important. Any person wishing to use the corresponding land must request authorisation from the bearer of the name, if available (not travelling or sick), before using it for hunting, fishing, or gathering.

Revealing one's name confers power on the hearer; beings with bad intentions could capture one through one's name if they heard it. This accounts for the practice of giving children grotesque names at an early age in order to bewilder jungle spirits (*wasan'dat*), which will not be able to make a connection between the child and this name. Such secrecy concerns other performative words, whose action cannot be undone after the words are pronounced. For instance, Protestant missionaries refused to care for Asmat patients if the 'witch doctor' had said words over them. Names can be very powerful, and to pronounce them has an observable effect on people and the

environment. Similarly, Errington and Gewertz (2001, 517) mention 'the "traditional" Chambri system of knowledge/power, wherein people could, among other things, dream truths and regulate the universe through chanting secret names'.

Names constitute 'active' cumulative entities and identities, which may be referred to as an 'entities portfolio', as they are not necessarily solicited at the same time or valid during the same period. Most of them confer a kind of power on the bearer when they are revealed. Among different types of names are unique ancestor names, which correspond to a famous ancestor, either masculine or feminine (names are gendered), and are received at bearers' deaths or death throes according to the decision of the traditional specialists; they are also associated with the particular ancestor's characteristics and abilities. The newly initiated replaces the former bearer in his original community, receiving family and land privileges. Such names, which exist in a defined and limited number, must have a bearer to make the ancestor 'live'. This also justifies the making of facsimile wooden heads, which are painted with lime at a name-bearer's death. Similarly, in the middle Sepik area studied by Bateson (1946, 21), a particular person bears the names of the founders of society, incarnating their presence inside the village.

The centre of Asmat political and ritual life is the ritual house, the *jeuw*, which is also the reference for kinship organisation. The *jeuw* is split into moieties, themselves divided into *dow'se* ('basic kindred groups'). Each *dow'se* bears an ancestor name to be 'followed' by its members. A *dow'se* also designates fireplaces in the *jeuw*, where the members eat during rituals and formerly gathered before a raid. Each Asmat can belong to several succeeding *dow'se* during his or her lifetime and has the choice of belonging to a *dow'se* on either parent's side or on one of the parents of his or her spouse. To take heads—and ancestors' names—enhances the collective 'energy' of the kindred group. As such, head-taking and name-taking were the starting point for head-hunting.

In head-hunting times, there was no village, only *jeuw*s and moieties, whose members moved as a result of land rights changes following head-hunting. The *jeuw* could split, and alliances were forged between *jeuw*s. Today, the *jeuw* is the place where important decisions are made and where any visitor must report before entering the village. The *jeuw* is the centre of identity; every Asmat belongs to a *jeuw* and is defined by it. The *jeuw* is also the key element of traditional time division; without a *jeuw*, no long-lasting ritual can be held. Bonding invisible and visible communities, long-lasting rituals are at the core of Asmat time. Prematurely translated as 'men's house' because it is often closed to women, the *jeuw*'s complete name is *jeuw ar dat mbi*, that is to say, 'lime and the spirits of the *jeuw*': the Asmat name for this building refers neither to the 'house' (*tsjem*) nor to 'men' (*ipitsj*). Instead, it mentions both lime, through which the Asmat dedicate the *jeuw* to the ancestors, and invisible entities that gather inside. In other words, it is the place where the living and the ancestors meet.

One can assume that head-hunting, as the core of ritual life, was prominent in Asmat life in the past, as well as recalled and embodied in objects, as is still the case

today. Besides enemies' skulls, which were kept by the killing warrior and had their stories told from time to time during the *tow pokm'bui* ritual, other manmade objects—such as war canoes, *bisj* ancestor poles and carvings bearing head-hunting symbols—were permanent reminders. In the 1960s and 1970s, some rebellions against the Indonesian Government led to head-hunting raids. The Protestant missionaries did their best to erase traces of head-hunting in myths (the warrior Beworpitsj is still presented as a model of behaviour), songs (some incite head-hunting and the associated kidnapping and rape of women), rituals (notably *tow pokm'bui*, which glorifies skilful warriors) and objects (as mnemonic supports for head-hunting and associated names). However, after decades of foreign influence, Catholic missionaries[3] are still apprehensive that the independence of West Papua, which is desired by the majority of my Papuan informants, would lead to the resurgence of head-hunting on the south coast.

On the Asmat side, opinions are mixed; the majority claim to be delighted that missionaries abolished head-hunting and cannibalism, but some express high regard for past times. Today, the name received from an ancestor is commemorated by a facsimile head. As Asmat-made objects must be made in conformity with the ancestors' requirements, all types of artefacts bear head-hunting symbols. Consequently, despite the prohibition of head-hunting in 1955, remnants of head-hunting emerge from time to time in daily life. Elmer Lorenz, TEAM[4] missionary among the Awyu (neighbours of the Asmat), several times heard people evoking head-hunting with nostalgia.

What Makes an Object-Mediator

Head-hunting is definitely present in Asmat material culture and expressed in rituals. One could classify Asmat rituals into two major categories: ephemeral (often individual, recognisable by the suffix *-'pok*) and long-lasting (collective, which sometimes last several years and are identifiable by the suffix *-pokm'bui*). The major objection expressed by Protestant missionaries towards objects related to long-lasting rituals, such as shields and *bisj* ancestor poles, is their mnemonic support of head-hunting. *Bisj* poles, in particular, remind descendants of their obligation to go on a head-hunting raid in memory of the dead whose effigies are carved on the poles. After raids were over, the poles were left to decay in sago fields (*cf.* Lohmann, this issue). Moreover, as the *bisj* bears an ancestor's name, it 'is' the related ancestor. Schneebaum (1990, 26) writes that, despite their massive commercialisation, the ritual carvings of the Asmat cannot be separated from the ritual context; they come to life when they receive the name of a recently deceased person.

The communicative aptness of Asmat objects is not limited to the lowlands. At the house of my friends, Koos and Paula, at Wormerveer in the Netherlands, the Asmat carver, Rufus Sati, and his brother spent an entire night talking with their deceased mother; her spirit was 'incarnated' into their mother's funeral mask (*jipae*), which was stored in the house's attic. This incarnation is collective: the physical mask is

inhabited by several deceased persons, even if it bears only one ancestor's name. Consequently, objects continue to 'contain' the ancestors' presence beyond borders and oceans unless they have been ritually removed. As Ernest Nditsjim told me in 2004: 'An Asmat may go where his ancestors already are.' In other words, ancestors are present in Asmat-made objects that are part of private or museum collections in Europe and the United States.

Asmat pastors (of whom there were four in 2004) also acknowledge the obvious reality of the presence of invisible entities in objects. According to the Asmat pastor, Paternus Cuakces, to follow the ancestors implies being in close contact with objects containing their spirits, and being aware that transgressing norms attracts their sanction. Although Protestant missionaries and successive governments have tried to discourage the Asmat from following their ancestors, because it contradicts a Christian way of life, these deeply rooted cultural practices are difficult to erase. From the following passage it is evident that Cuakces does not have a choice: the weight of tradition imposes itself on him, as underlined by Boas (1927), who stressed cultural constraints on art. As Cuakces says, and as the missionaries would have said, the devil took advantage of Asmat credulity and incarnated himself into the wood of their carvings:

> To transgress [the norm of tradition] has fatal consequences. You do not believe it? For me, as an Asmat who knows the context of the *bisj*, if I believe it or not, I must see … [it when a spirit] has penetrated into the carving because of the veneration given to it … I am [not only a pastor, I am] also an Asmat. We [the Protestant missionaries and I] examine what it contains inside of it, and it [the content] is not authorized [by the Church]—except in appropriate locations such as the *jeuw* or outdoors, but not inside the church.

The spiritual content described by Cuakces is precisely what missionaries attempted to eradicate when trying to abolish head-hunting. Many missionaries talk and behave as if they found the existence of this content so disturbing that they would not bring Asmat objects into Protestant churches. According to the art historian, Van der Zee (1996, 24), many kinds of objects bear ancestral names, such as anthropomorphic carvings, canoes, houses, paddles, spears, fibre bags, dog's teeth necklaces, domestic dogs (a dog brought fire to the Asmat in myth, so Asmat may not eat their flesh) and pigs, all designated by the generic term *etsjow'pok*, 'things that make grow'. Correlating missionaries' apprehensions, Zegwaard (1959, 1029) wrote that, when he was in the area between 1953 and 1958, such objects encouraged warriors to avenge the deaths of the ancestors whose names had been given to the objects. Objects like these are also related to the 'red skins', who are said to live in rivers and sometimes drag fishermen to the bottom. Also called *etsjow'pok* by the Asmat, red skins are described as 'white' (probably dead) Asmat. Rivers carry along dangerous objects that are supposed to belong to the red skins, such as drums, bows, arrows and armbands, which may have been remnants of head-hunting raids presumably found in rivers during head-hunting times.

We can see that objects are not only mnemonic supports but also serve as vessels of communication between the Asmat and their ancestors. However, the Asmat do not explicitly mention communication with the ancestors as such, except before the carver begins working; the carvers I interviewed said that they are connected through an invisible canal to the ancestors who transmit to them a mental image of what is to be carved. The ancestors also 'talk' through noises in the *jeuw*, and their presence is detected when they possess *wair'ipitsj*. Disease and misfortune are generally understood as an expression of their disagreement. Finally, the ancestors may talk through dreams (*cf.* Glaskin, this issue).

Every action of daily life is meaningful for the Asmat. Ancestors are omnipresent and assimilated with other invisible beings, such as spirits of the forest (*wasan'dat*), and most behaviour happens as a function of the ancestors' supposed expectations. Permanent communication with the ancestors allows the boundaries between visible and invisible, peace and war, life and death, to be crossed. Chronologically, there are three stages of cultural exchange between the Asmat and their ancestors. First, the ancestors preceded the Asmat and bequeath positive information to their descendants (the norm is supposed to keep Asmat society sane and balanced). Second, the Asmat, grateful for their ancestors' legacy, practise positive behaviours to please them, by following the norm. Then, in the third stage, the ancestors react to descendants' behaviour during dreams, either negatively (by explaining the cause of diseases and misfortunes, which are sanctions for the Asmat's transgression from their norm) or, in most of the cases, positively (by bequeathing lands and magical gifts to their deserving descendants). Hence, relationships between the Asmat and their ancestors are based on an exchange of merit on the one side, and rewards and sanctions on the other.

Following the idea of an 'entities portfolio', each Asmat-made artefact is said to host at least one spiritual entity, identified by the same term as the spirit that inhabits people, *damuw*. Translated as 'soul' by missionaries and other newcomers, since it disappears at death, *dambuw* is described by Sowada (1996, 67–8) as a 'double', and can be heard during the night when its inert physical body has been left behind. The *dambuw* phenomenon is much more complex than an explanation of the dream experience. The Asmat claim *dambuw* leaves its body—consciously or unconsciously—because it can be heard moving; it can be observed in a place different from that occupied by the sleeping body (sometimes only body contours are seen, supposed to be *dambuw*); it can be captured by an entity with harmful intentions (which generates disease or death in the related body); and it can act independently of its physical body. Concepts comparable to *dambuw* exist in other societies of New Guinea; for instance, the Ankave *dəŋə'* ('awareness') is able to extract itself from the body, notably during dreaming (Bonnemère 1996, 226).

The Western tendency to entangle life in a chronological and linear continuity contradicts Asmat spirituality: human *dambuw* is received at birth and *lost* at the death of the body, unlike Christian notions of a soul. Asmat spirituality is organised like a portfolio of spiritual beings bearing varied characteristics (just as coins can be

distinguished by images, colours, metal, size, weight and nominal value), solicited at different moments, and their interventions do not necessarily follow one another. The disappearance of *dambuw* at death does not prevent the recently dead from being active during the days following their death. It concerns the same *person* but not the same invisible beings; holding several identities concurrently (unlike invisible beings) is linked to holding several names. This construction resembles Strathern's (1988, *e.g.*,102–3, 321–2) partible person in the sense that dividual persons exist through their social interactions, which determine distinct solicited identities, whereas one Asmat name (unlike identity) is used in a specific context following the tacit agreement of the collectivity.

According to my informant, Markus Yisimamtsji at Atsj, during the night the shelter where carvings are gathered can be as noisy as a standing crowd in the *jeuw*. Possible noises that may be heard in these circumstances are whispers, sighs, voices, crumpling of tree leaves, friction on floors, steps, knocks on the walls and cracking sounds. Such noises are sometimes so loud that they cover other surrounding jungle noise. During the daytime, people often catch sight of *dambuw* shadows and hear their whispers, which deter passers-by from walking too close. When invisible beings are ancestors, they generally make their presence known by whistling *fuw*; this word also designates a bamboo flute used in some rituals and, formerly, in calls for head-hunting raids. Terms related to ancestors, such as *fuw*, are often polysemic. Children must be kept away from such dangerous places because of the risk of getting sick or even dying if their parents do not perform a compensation ritual, asking the invisible entity to cease its hold on them. Actually, parents are supposed to keep young children away from powerful objects, whose *dambuw* 'punish' their children by making them sick. Consequently, parents must apologise orally to the offended object and give it an offering, hoping that the entity of the object—generally *dambuw*—will be persuaded to release its curse on the child. The prohibition of children from seeing certain kinds of objects, such as funeral masks, or scenes like the weaving of funeral masks by *wair'ipitsj,* is so rigid that a transgression can be punished by death: the child is killed by his or her discoverer. Women are also affected by the prohibition, but I did not hear about any women being killed after having witnessed a prohibited scene or object.

However, *dambuw* is not irremediably anchored to an object (or a person): it may be evicted on purpose and the carving thrown away, destroyed or sold as soon as its ritual function is accomplished. Generally speaking, any action related to tradition—particularly art—must have a purpose agreed to by the ancestors, If an offering is made in anticipation of an event, the event must take place or else one risks the ancestors' sanction. The offering seals the agreement with the ancestors, which cannot, from then on, be broken. Nobody may ignore it. As a result, when objects are carved in order to be sold at the annual auction at Agats, the carvers may be in trouble if those objects are not selected for auction. In other words, the presence of *dambuw* does not appear by chance; each object is created for a particular purpose that may not change.

Going back to *dambuw* and its non-permanent anchorage to an object, Geremias M'Baith explained to me (at Cemnes in 2001) that a way to distinguish an 'empty' object was to check whether it had a fragment chopped away. At Uwus, people remove a piece from *bisj* ancestor poles and leave them in the jungle to prevent invisible beings from staying inside the carving (Konrad, Konrad and Winkelmann 1996, 304). Normally, art is not supposed to exist outside of its original purpose. The cut fragment must be preserved; this frees the carving and allows the *dambuw* to stay in the Asmat area instead of being exported with the object. In a society of head-hunters, the cultural practice of chopping a fragment from a carving to release its spiritual content could be compared to cutting off heads to 'free' their spiritual content: the ancestor name and its corresponding entity/identity.

Objects incarnate the agreement between men and ancestors. They are consecrated by sprinkling lime on the object, which confirms the agreement. Lime is also used to throw on the walls of a new *jeuw* and on a sick child's forehead for the same reason. The carver, *wow'ipistsj*, makes an agreement with the ancestors to allow the *dambuw* to penetrate the object; and consequently makes what he understands to be a living object. Carvers belong to a tradition of specialists who communicate with the ancestors, from whom they receive knowledge and inspiration. Before beginning work, the artist is invested with the mental image of the object, sent by the ancestors through a spiritual channel perceptible to their descendants (*koridor adat* in Bahasa Indonesia). Thus, he knows in advance how the object will look. As described, when his work is completed, he sprinkle limes on it before giving it to its new owner—with a recommendation to take good care of it, like a living being. He also advises the possessor to use the object with care, or risk incurring its wrath. In return, the invisible entity of the carving watches over the household and protects it from unwelcome visitors. This rule is valid for any carved object, particularly human or sacred animal figures; all are considered to be alive and incarnate the agreement between the ancestors and the owner of the object.

Illustrating this principle is the conscious integration of spells into objects. *Eeram*, the spell of victory, is efficient in both health and war (the *eeram* maker, or *eeram'ipitsj*, is also the traditional healer) and may be inserted into some shields in order to strike down the enemy via a short ritual called *eeram'pok*. My informants (listed in de Hontheim 2008, 292–4) are unanimous about this, saying that the one who begins the war wins it. Schneebaum (1991, 81) impressively alluded to this point when he wrote that in past times a named shield provided bravery to the deceased's descendant and ensured him victory. Intensely used, this spell constitutes itself as a living entity that eats its victims from the inside, like the spell of death, *arow'pok*. The entity also exists through a marginal shape which, inserted into a carving by a skilful craftsman, transforms itself into a crocodile, a snake, a cassowary bird or a human being in order to get rid of a troublesome relative. The resulting death happens instantly as the carving seizes the victim's *dambuw* (instead of chasing it away, as in the case of disease). For the carver, Kasmirus Amdusu, *bisj* poles have the same property. These carvings are dangerous; nobody would dare to steal one (to sell, for instance).

All spiritual contents of objects are felt by the Asmat, who can say whether invisible beings are present or not. They immediately know when they see the object. Details of how to treat those objects are set by the Asmat norm, which tradition holders, *wair'ipitsj,* watch over. In other words, one may never be in contact with such objects in any way. Asmat often interpret accidents befalling foreigner as a consequence of disrespect towards one of these objects.

In 2004, Erik Sarkol, the curator of Agats museum, told me about a number of incidents, notably one about Ursula Konrad's computer, which suddenly stopped working after she laughed at the shape of the sex organ of a feminine figure, but then immediately began to work again after Erik's silent apologies. One Freeport Mine employee who had made fun of a carving was haunted during the whole night by the image of it; in the morning, his arm bore injuries he claimed were inflicted by the carving with a cassowary bone dagger. In 1993, Erik hit a *bisj* pole at the museum, managed to catch it before it fell on the floor and was astounded by its extremely light weight. When he tried to return it to its location, he could no longer move it as the pole had recovered its original weight. Besides stories of this kind, Erik constantly hears noises coming from the *jipae* funeral masks at the back of the museum. Even though Erik is not Asmat (he originally comes from the Kei islands), he takes Asmat spirituality very seriously and his stories express his fears of Asmat invisible beings. For him, there is no doubt that invisible contents are clearly perceptible, and he does his best to respect the carvings.

For the Asmat, generally speaking, one benefit of taking proper care of the object is that it attracts protection from within the household. Valid for both persons and objects, physical contact with tradition in its material dimension (ornaments, shields) might be related to beauty. As beauty necessarily pleases the ancestors, when one decorates oneself according to the rules, it becomes so obvious that everyone would describe it as beautiful. The ancestors themselves are beautiful when they are exhibited, and their beauty transcends all others: everyone inevitably admires the funeral masks, *jipae,* when they show up in the village every ten to fifteen years. From the emic point of view, it is a performance of beauty (*cf.* Mageo, this issue).

Emotions inspired by personal connection with material components of tradition concern contact not only with the object but also with body ritual ornaments, *tsjosow'pok*, which are more than mere decorations. For instance, the cuscus fur hat, *fatsj'in,* contains the spirit of the animal, the ancestors' messenger. This 'ancestor's arm' acts like a live camera (webcam) on the bearer's forehead and is inseparable from rituals and feasts; it guarantees to the ancestors the supervision of their descendants in the critical ritual context. The authorised contexts, moments and places are strictly codified. Zegwaard (1959, 1033) adds a nuance: not only do objects symbolise dexterity, bravery and invincibility but corporal decorations also provoke these qualities in the bearer, in addition to the influence of the pattern on the person who watches it. Given the euphoria provided by decoration, the rule not to wear it outside a certain context is hard to respect. For those who respect the ancestors' norm not to use traditional ornaments, whatever the context, the ancestors

compensate for their frustration by authorising the leaves of a sweet fruit to be put in their hair and sago powder on their chin.

Alternatively, this euphoria is considered so delightful that it can incite some Asmat to violate the rules of tradition in order to attain such a feeling. However, this exposes them to the ancestors' sanctions. Several stories mention men who went hunting with ornaments (shield, cuscus hat, lime drawings) in order to attain this state of joy and ended up seriously sick afterwards. My informant, Abraham Buipir, underlined the happiness provoked by the *bisj* poles ritual, but not just because of the prospect of going on a head-hunting raid: the beating of *tifa* (drums), dancing, wounds and scars acquired during *jipae pokm'bui*, and scars acquired in any other ritual context also generate much joy. All Asmat who participate agree on this point. In the missionary notes of Cal Roesler (dated 01/10/1958), fibre armbands around the legs and neck are able to give happiness. In addition, decoration can also be curative. In his Introduction to *An Asmat sketch book #7*, Trenkenschuh (1983, 1) talks about the 'constant source of pleasure' and joy that culture represents for Asmat people. Underlined by the active practice of tradition (dancing, decorating oneself to please the ancestors), this complete sensation of happiness contradicts some missionaries' impression that the Asmat are unhappy and beset by fear (which would easily justify the abolition of head-hunting 'for their own good').

Imagined Collections

As suggested by Van der Grijp (2006, 28), a collection of artefacts has the ability to connect the visible and invisible (*cf.* Miller 2009); one can expect the latter to be different for collectors than for the Asmat. For art collectors, a collection of artefacts has a greater value than that of the objects taken separately, irrespective of their transactional worth (Van der Grijp 2006, 7). Beyond the aesthetic appearance of the object, its scarcity—in relation to abolished usages and to pictures of the past—represents a determining incentive for the collector. The farther the society of origin in time and space, the more imagination the collector can invest in an object. In other words the original invisible component of the object has to be materially disconnected from it, beyond the horizon, to be valued by the collector.

It is revealing to see tourists' fascination with the image of the 'savage naked man' in New Guinea, the inaccessibility of which allows the imagination to wander. Tourism agencies, notably in Jayapura, sell the image of uniqueness: in exchange for a heavy fee, customers have the opportunity to meet 'stone age head-hunters', temporarily peaceful thanks to privileged relationships with representatives of the agency. In Jayapura and Merauke, tourist guides show advertisements for tribal war, head-hunting and fibre skirts to attract customers, making the past available to them. Attached to the Spring 2003 bulletin of the American Museum of Asmat Art, an advertisement for a tour amongst the Asmat and Dani 'offers an adventurous traveller the opportunity to experience Stone Age tribes who still cling to their ancient rituals'.

A comparable incentive for tourists travelling to remote areas has been observed in the neighbouring Indonesian island of Sumba, where 'the cameras that every tourist brings to capture images of head-hunters and primitive violence become the very emblems of the exotic violence they are designed to capture' (Hoskins 2002, 797). Hoskins (pp. 803–4) names this particular kind of tourism 'adventure tourism', for the major reason why tourists go to Sumba: to see 'a dangerous ritual battle [Pasola] that is likely to include a certain amount of bloodshed and possibly even fatalities … described in the media as ''tribal warfare''.

Besides violence, the idea of tribal warfare accords with the image of nakedness and a sort of savage sexuality, which also attract visitors. Not long ago, American tourists complained to the manager of an ethno-tourism agency because they had not seen any naked men during their trip to New Guinea (Koos Knol, Wormerveer, pers. comm. 2006). The Swedish tour operator, Magnus Andersson, is known to guide his customers into the jungle dressed with penis gourds. Shudders are not Westerners' privilege. During my last fieldtrip in 2004, I discovered a new fad among Indonesian men living in West Papua, which appears to be the summit of adventure: to be photographed in underwear next to Korowai warriors with bows, arrows and penis gourds. The former well-known art adviser for the MET, Tobias Schneebaum, is another revealing example: before pursuing a degree in anthropology, he first went to the Amazon to meet cannibals, live naked amongst them, find sexual partners and share a cannibalistic meal with them, as described in his travelogue (1969). He later toured amongst the Asmat with the same goals (Shapiro and Gwen 2000). Jefri Pemila, the Pentecostal pastor from Manado who settled the Pentecostal Church in the Asmat in 2001, admitted in 2004 that the major argument used by the Pentecostal seminary school in Jayapura to persuade new pastors to go to the south coast was that the Asmat and their neighbours were still busy with war, cannibalism and head-hunting.

These images are part of the invisible content carried by objects that constitute Western collections nowadays. Without being initiated or immersed into New Guinean societies, but limiting their journeys to the antique shops, collectors create connections between themselves and the society that fascinates them. Turning back the clock, they get closer to a vanished period that features startling cultural practices such as head-hunting. In informal conversations with collectors at openings and cocktail parties, I noticed a certain pleasure in considering head-hunting as a continuing practice in remote jungle areas, particularly among owners of objects related to it. I found the symbolic charge carried by collectible objects even more obvious among Indonesian collectors based in Merauke and Jayapura, as if they seized the occasion to highlight the cultural gap between themselves and the local people.[5] This idea of turning back the clock can be related to Appadurai's (1996, 75) social '*patina*', in which the value of an item makes sense in a precise context, in this case head-hunting. According to Appadurai's reflections, 'patina' sets a way of life that is gone forever. It nourishes the capacity for evocation of objects, like Proust's (1913–1927) nostalgic relishing of a *madeleine* reminding him of his childhood in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

This tendency to reify the past is illustrated by the assertion of Catholic missionaries that potential buyers would not purchase innovative or Christianity-inspired carvings at the annual art auction in Agats. They would not have the opportunity to do so, either. Asmat behaviour corroborates this statement: in 2001, Asmat jury members set aside creative carvings proposed for auction because they were 'not traditional'. This is exactly like the Kwoma people for whom the best artists are more able than others to reproduce their clan's repertoire of designs, as if their work were 'identical in basic subject matter and style' (Bowden 2006, 38). This may explain why some Asmat interviewed in 2001 expressed sceptical surprise at foreigners' fervour for ritual objects involved in head-hunting or cannibalism.

Scarcity is another notion that plays a role here, as the objects are reminders of obsolete social practices or are made of materials that should have deteriorated. To be scarce, the object has to be the most antique possible. Buying such an object, the collector becomes the trustee of spectacular—and extinct—customs. Going back to Van der Grijp's reflections, this scarcity makes both the object and the collector exceptional and sought after. Similarly, owning a piece of art allows a spiritual connection between the artist who made it and the person who collected it. The collector is involved in the trajectory of the piece of art that began its life in the artist's workshop. Consequently, the collector partakes in the status of the object and identifies himself with his collection; he is sometimes interviewed as a specialist, as if ownership had provided him with mastery. Some of the collectors I interviewed refused to have their photograph taken in order to avoid being harassed by art dealers, and it shrouds them in mystery. At the same time, the collector's ego is exhibited on walls or in showcases. The object also plays the role of mood-regulator (did some objects not have an impact on the Asmat mood?), providing its owner with a feeling of success or triumph, or sometimes even greatness (Van der Grijp 2006, 17). The collector may also express the frustration of incompletion until he acquires the object.

According to Van der Grip (2006, 45), collecting seals an agreement by the collector to share his life with his 'pieces':[6] 'his' because 90–95 per cent of 'primitive art' collectors are men (Van der Grijp 2006, 116). To some extent, this reminds us of the idea that carving or owning an Asmat object requires one to respect a tacit agreement to take good care of it. Independently of its physical appearance, the object has an invisible content to which the collector reacts and is therefore sometimes willing to pay very high amounts. Moreover, the object becomes part of a collection by being extracted from its original context and reinserted into a new context: it acquires a new meaning (decontextualisation versus recontextualisation). Collectors seeking to attain coherence for the object as part of a collection create categories and search for objects that fit those categories, even if they sometimes have to reconceive them. On the whole, collectors create order in a chaotic world (Van der Grijp 2006, 31), as Gunter and Ursula Konrad (Konrad, Konrad and Winkelmann 1996, 316) did for the Asmat, describing twelve cultural groups said to be determined by aesthetic and linguistic patterns. In fact, patterns are more aesthetic than linguistic, as

distinctions among categories take into account myths, long-lasting rituals, songs, art and ritual objects (p. 303). For the Konrads, the imaginary qualities of objects are not described as such, but as objective and observable criteria, the description of which evolves according to the collector's knowledge of the field. I interviewed the Konrads in Mönchengladbach in September 2003. According the them, when they came to the Asmat for the first time in 1971 there were four Asmat cultural groups, as echoed in Schneebaum (1990). The Konrads inspired Petrus Drabbe MSC (1959), who divided the Asmat into five linguistic groups.

Conclusions

The foregoing examples show notable differences between Euro-American and Asmat understandings of 'art'. Like many other New Guinean societies, such as the Kwoma, Asmat people believe the origin of artworks and art patterns to be supernatural. Bowden (2006, 37) suggests that this would explain why, traditionally, objects are discarded and sometimes destroyed after their ritual use. This is a fundamentally different approach from that of collectors and others in Western societies, for whom the disappearance of artefacts, which feed their representations of the world, is considered a cultural loss. However, it is worth noting that, despite this lack of interest in maintaining objects, they can still be used by the Asmat as virtual mediators to build up a connection with their ancestors, as illustrated by the example of Rufus Sati.

Furthermore, my research identifies the significant influence of objects on mood. As vessels of communication, objects materialise the agreement between the invisible and the visible, guaranteeing harmonious cohabitation. Arousing emotions, the objects generate an effect on the self which has to be understood beyond mere symbolism of patterns. Traditional ornaments, in particular, provoke three different effects on the Asmat: personal qualities induced by close contact with objects, satisfaction and relief resulting from pleasing the ancestors, and euphoria. We could argue that objects are used as vessels of communication on the collectors' side as well, as the latter are displaying to the outside world objects that are not necessarily fully visible. Whereas the ancestors give feedback to their Asmat descendants, comments about collections may be expressed in the press or at mundane events. Particularly for those who display their collections, the objects constitute a reason for sharing information and exchanging opinions.

Comparing the Asmat and collectors' points of view, the preferences of both tend to converge towards objects that are meaningful in Asmat society. This is probably because these objects precisely fit the Asmat criteria of beauty, aiming to please the ancestors, while at the same time attesting to the technical mastery of the artists, which is appreciated by collectors. Attraction to the objects on both sides is ambiguous, worrisome (to the Asmat because of red skins and potentially harmful *dambuw*, and to collectors because of past head-hunting and bloody activities), and appeasing (resulting from joy on the part of the Asmat inspired by contact with the

object, and an enhancing effect on the collector's ego inspired by possession of the object). A collector I met in Paris in 2007 admitted his passion for an object that scared his wife to the point that she had not entered the living room since it was hung on its wall.

Beyond the aesthetic dimension, the existence of an invisible content is obviously prevalent on the part of both the Asmat and the collectors and manifests in different ways. As described above, the owner of a carving, sometimes the artist, removes a fragment before offering it for sale in order to free the spiritual content of the object. It is as if the content flew away through the opening like a fragrance, preventing it from physically escaping the Asmat area. This information was confirmed by informants in 2001 and 2004 (de Hontheim 2008, 293–4). Without being aware of this cultural precaution, Jean-Michel Chazine, a French archaeologist who worked on the British Museum collections, himself noticed that a part was missing in the carved Asmat objects he saw (pers. comm. 19 May, 2006). Would the collectors of these items have acquired them if they knew they had been spiritually and materially transformed before being sold? Some may not be pleased by such a revelation.

Notes

[1] *Acknowledgments*: I am grateful to Roger Lohmann for his systematic and patient remarks, Joel Robbins for his brilliant ideas and analysis, and Kevin Flynn for his helpful review of the text.

[2] There has been ongoing debate as to the appropriate term to use to designate ethnographic art. This debate aims to avoid the pejorative connotations of such words as 'primitive', 'ethnic', or 'tribal', which might relegate non-European art to the category of artefacts seen as inferior to masterpieces like those in the Louvre Museum in Paris. The French '*arts premiers*' is another enlightening example suggesting an evolutionist scale in art.

[3] The missionaries are mostly Sacred-Heart (Dutch, arrived in the area in 1953), Crosier (American, arrived in 1958) and Maryknoll (American, arrived in 1978).

[4] The Evangelical Alliance Mission, created in the US in 1890 by Frederic Franson. Their first missionaries in the Asmat area began work in 1955.

[5] Various Indonesian attitudes and discourses facing this cultural gap have been studied in a previous article (de Hontheim 2003).

[6] This word is typically used by collectors and museum professionals. It tends to deny the spiritual value of the object and its ethnographic context by pointing up its commercial value and limiting it to a number in a series.

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