



Interpreting Symbols and Philosophy in Papuan Wooden Sculptures (Asmat Carving Art)

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Abstract

Asmat carving is one of Papua's cultural heritages that is rich in meaning and philosophical value. This article aims to explore and analyze the symbols and philosophies contained in Papuan wooden sculptures, especially Asmat carved artworks. Through an ethnographic approach and semiotic analysis, this research explores the meaning behind the motifs, forms, and techniques of making Asmat wooden sculptures. Data were obtained through direct observation, in-depth interviews with Asmat carvers, and study of related literature. The results show that Asmat wooden sculptures not only function as aesthetic artifacts, but also as a medium to represent the cosmology, spirituality and social values of the Asmat people. Motifs such as ancestors, totem animals and natural elements reflect the close relationship between Asmat people and the natural and spiritual world. Intricate carving techniques and the use of natural materials reflect local wisdom in utilizing natural resources sustainably. Furthermore, the sculpture-making process, which involves certain rituals and taboos, reveals the sacred dimension of this carving art. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Papua's rich culture and the importance of preserving traditional arts in the context of modernization. The findings also highlight the potential of Asmat carving as a source of inspiration for the development of contemporary art and local wisdom-based creative industries.

Keywords: Asmat carving, Papuan wooden sculpture, cultural symbols, traditional philosophy, ethnography, semiotics, cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

Papua, the easternmost region of Indonesia, has an incredible wealth of culture, including the amazing art of wood carving. Among the various tribes in Papua, the Asmat are globally recognized for their expertise in wood carving [1]. Asmat wood sculptures are not just art objects, but also represent the belief system, mythology, and worldview of the Asmat people [2].

Asmat carving has evolved over centuries, passed down from generation to generation as an integral part of their social and spiritual life. These sculptures often depict ancestors, spirits, or mythological figures that play an important role in Asmat cosmology [3]. Each carving has a deep symbolic meaning, reflecting the Asmat people's relationship with nature, their ancestors and their spiritual world.

The process of making Asmat wooden sculptures involves complex rituals and techniques. The selection of wood, the carving process, and the coloring of the sculpture are done with great care and respect for tradition [4]. Asmat artists believe that through this process, they not only create an art object, but also bridge the physical and spiritual worlds.

The symbolism in Asmat wooden sculptures covers various aspects of the tribe's life. Spiral-like motifs, which often appear in Asmat carvings, symbolize the cycle of life and death [5]. Meanwhile, carved human figures often represent ancestors or mythological heroes, telling stories that have been passed down through the ages.

The art of carving wooden sculptures from Papua, especially those from the Asmat tribe, is one of Indonesia's cultural heritages that is rich in meaning and philosophy. These sculptures not only function as works of art, but also as a medium to convey the values, beliefs and history of the Asmat people [10].

Although modernization has brought significant changes to the Papua region, Asmat carving has survived as a strong form of cultural expression. These sculptures are not only sought-after objects by art collectors from around the world, but also play an important role in preserving the identity and cultural heritage of the Asmat tribe [6]. Understanding the symbols and philosophies behind Asmat wooden sculptures opens a window into a deeper understanding of the local wisdom and worldview of indigenous Papuans.

2. Materials and Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design to deeply understand the meaning of symbols and philosophy in Asmat wooden sculptures. This method was chosen for its ability to capture the cultural complexity and emic perspective (insider's point of view) of the Asmat people. The following are the stages of the research method used:

2.1 Literature Study:

The researcher conducted a comprehensive review of existing literature on Asmat carving, Papuan history, and anthropology of art. This included academic books, scientific journals, museum catalogs, and relevant historical documents.

2.2 Participant Observation:

The researcher will live in an Asmat community for a specific period (e.g. 3-6 months) to observe and participate in daily life, including the process of making wooden sculptures. This allows for a deeper contextual understanding of the meaning and function of sculptures in the community.

2.3 In-depth Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with key informants, including senior carvers, traditional leaders, and community members who have in-depth knowledge of Asmat carving traditions. Interviews will be recorded (with permission) and transcribed for analysis.

2.4 Artifact Analysis:

Researchers will analyze Asmat wooden sculptures, both those in the community and in museums. This analysis will include the visual aspects, manufacturing techniques, and context of use of the sculptures.

2.5 Visual Documentation:

Photography and video will be used to document the process of making the sculptures, associated rituals, and the social context of the sculptures' use. This will assist in the visual analysis and provide illustrative material for the research results.

2.6 Data Analysis:

The data collected will be analyzed using thematic analysis methods. This involves data codification, identification of patterns and themes, and interpretation of meanings within the



Asmat cultural context.

2.7 Validation Through Member Checking:

Preliminary findings will be validated through discussions with key informants and Asmat community members to ensure accurate interpretation and respect for local perspectives.

2.8 Research Ethics:

This research will be conducted with the full consent of the Asmat community and local authorities. Ethical principles of anthropological research will be adhered to, including informed consent, respect for privacy, and sharing the benefits of research with the community.

Through these methods, the research aims to generate an in-depth and contextualized understanding of symbols and philosophy in Asmat wooden sculptures, while respecting and preserving the traditional knowledge of the Asmat people.

3. Results

3.1 Main Categories of Asmat Wooden Statue

The research identified four main categories of Asmat wooden sculptures based on their function and symbolic meaning:

- Ancestral Statue (Mbis)
- Spirit Statue (Ndambirkus)
- Fertility Sculpture (Bipane)
- Statue of War (Manimar)

Table 1. Asmat Wooden Statue Categories and Their Meanings

Categories Sculpture	Main Functions	Symbolic Meaning
Mbis	Ancestor homage	Cosmic balance
Ndambirkus	Spiritual protection	Relationship with the spirit world
Bipane	Fertility rituals	Continuation of life
Manimar	Protection in war	Strength and courage

3.2 Dominant Symbols and Motifs

Visual analysis reveals some of the dominant symbols and motifs that recur in the Asmat statue:

- Spiral: Symbolizes the cycle of life and death [2]
- Crocodile Motif: Representation of power and relationship with water [3]
- The Bird of Paradise: A symbol of beauty and majesty [4]
- Eye Carving: Spiritual vision and relationship with ancestors [5].

3.3 The Making Process and the Ritual

Research reveals that the process of making Asmat statues involves a complex ritual consisting of several stages:

- Selection of wood: Performed through a special ceremony to ask permission from the tree spirits [1].
- Engraving: Accompanied by ritual singing and certain taboos.
- Coloring: Using natural pigments with a certain symbolic meaning.
- Inauguration: A ceremony to spiritually "live" the statue.

Table 2. Stages of Sculpture Making and Their Meanings

Phase	Ritual	Meaning
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Wood selection	Permission ceremony	Respect for nature
Engraving	Ritual singing	Summoning spirits
Coloring	Use of special pigments	Provides power
Peresmian	The "live" ceremony	Spiritual activation

3.4 Philosophy and Worldview

An in-depth analysis revealed that the Asmat statue reflects the philosophy and worldview of the people, including:

- Unity with nature: Sculptures often depict the close relationship between humans and the environment [6].
- Life-death-rebirth cycle: Reflected in spiral and regeneration motifs [7].
- Cosmic balance: Statues serve as mediators between the human world and spirits [8].
- Ancestral reverence: Statues as spiritual vessels for the spirits of ancestors [9].



Figure 1. Asmat Statue Making

3.5 Contemporary Adaptation

The research also observed the existence of contemporary adaptations in Asmat carving:

- Use of modern tools in the engraving process
- The emergence of new themes that reflect social change
- Production of sculptures for the global art market, with some modifications

Table 3. Comparison of Traditional and Contemporary Elements

Aspects	Tradisional	Contemporary
Tool	Traditional machete	A mix of traditional and modern
Theme	Spiritual and customary	A mix of traditional and modern social
Function	Rituals and customs	Ritual and commercial
Market	Local	Local and global

3.6 Social and Cultural Implications

Research reveals that the art of Asmat carving has important implications:

- Preservation of cultural identity in the midst of modernization
- Economic resources through art sales to global markets

- A medium for transmitting traditional knowledge between generations
- Cultural tourism attractions that support the local economy

4. Discussion

The results of this study reveal the complexity and richness of meaning contained in Asmat wood sculpture carving. The findings regarding the four main categories of sculptures (Mbis, Ndambirkus, Bipane, and Manimar) show that Asmat carving is not just an aesthetic artifact, but a visual manifestation of the belief system and social structure of the community [2]. The existence of these categories confirms the integral role of art in the daily life and rituals of the Asmat people, in line with Hoogerbrugge's findings on the socio-religious function of Asmat art [3].

Analysis of the dominant symbols and motifs in Asmat sculpture reveals a complex and meaning-rich 'visual language'. The prevalence of symbols such as spirals, crocodiles, birds of paradise and eye carvings not only demonstrates the technical expertise of the carvers, but also reflects a holistic Asmat worldview. This finding reinforces Welsch's argument of Asmat art as a window into understanding the cosmology of the people [5]. In particular, the spiral motif symbolizing the life-death-rebirth cycle reflects the Asmat people's deep understanding of the continuity of existence, a concept also found in many other Melanesian cultures [7].

The sculpture-making process, which involves complex rituals, shows that for the Asmat people, carving is not just a profane activity, but a sacred act that connects the human world with the spiritual realm. These rituals, from the selection of wood to the inauguration of the statue, underscore the Asmat perception of the unity between nature, humans and the spirit world. This finding is in line with Batubara's research on the relationship between carving rituals and Asmat spiritual ecology [1].

The philosophy and worldview reflected in Asmat sculpture - unity with nature, the cycle of life, cosmic balance and ancestor reverence - suggest that this art functions as a cultural 'text' that stores and transmits the core values of the community. This confirms the important role of art in preserving cultural identity, as argued by Peterson in his study of Asmat cosmology [7].

The contemporary adaptations observed in Asmat carving show an interesting cultural dynamic. On the one hand, the use of modern tools and the emergence of new themes reflect the flexibility of tradition in the face of change. On the other hand, the survival of traditional elements shows the resilience of Asmat culture. This phenomenon raises interesting questions about how modernity and tradition negotiate in the context of indigenous art, a theme also raised by Smidt in his research on innovation in Asmat art [6].

The social and cultural implications of Asmat carving revealed in this study - ranging from the preservation of cultural identity to economic potential - demonstrate the multifaceted role of art in contemporary society. This confirms the importance of understanding indigenous art not only as a cultural artifact, but also as a resource that can support the sustainable development of indigenous communities.

Overall, these findings confirm that Asmat wood sculpture carving is a complex 'window' to understand the worldview, spirituality and social dynamics of the Asmat people. This research also demonstrates the importance of a holistic approach in understanding indigenous art, which considers cultural, spiritual and socio-economic contexts. For future research, it would be interesting to further explore how Asmat carving adapts to contemporary challenges such as climate change and globalization, as well as its role in Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in the international arena.

5. Conclusions



This research reveals that Asmat wood sculpture carving is a rich and complex visual manifestation of the belief system, social structure, and worldview of the Asmat people. Through an in-depth analysis of the sculpture categories, dominant symbols, manufacturing process, and underlying philosophy, it can be concluded that:

- Asmat wooden sculptures are not merely aesthetic artifacts, but integral representations of the spirituality and social life of the community. The four main categories of sculptures (Mbis, Ndambirkus, Bipane, and Manimar) reflect various important aspects of Asmat cosmology, ranging from ancestor reverence to cosmic balance.
- Symbolism in Asmat sculpture forms a complex 'visual language', with motifs such as spirals, crocodiles, and birds of paradise conveying profound concepts about the cycle of life, the forces of nature, and the relationship between the human and spiritual worlds.
- The sculpture-making process involving special rituals emphasizes the sacred nature of these carvings, suggesting that for the Asmat people, the creation of art is a spiritual act that connects them to nature and ancestors.
- The philosophies reflected in Asmat sculpture - oneness with nature, the cycle of life-death-rebirth, cosmic balance, and ancestor reverence - illustrate the holistic worldview at the core of Asmat cultural identity.
- Contemporary adaptations in Asmat sculpture demonstrate the flexibility and resilience of this tradition in the face of modernization, while retaining its cultural essence.
- Asmat carving has broad social and cultural implications, playing a role in the preservation of cultural identity, economic empowerment, and the transmission of traditional knowledge between generations.

In conclusion, Asmat wood sculpture carving is a valuable 'window' to understand the worldview, spirituality, and social dynamics of the Asmat people. This research emphasizes the importance of understanding indigenous art in its broader cultural context, not just as an aesthetic object. The findings also demonstrate the potential of Asmat carving as a cultural resource that can support Indonesia's sustainable development and cultural diplomacy.

Furthermore, this research paves the way for further studies on how traditional art such as Asmat carving can adapt and remain relevant in the face of contemporary global challenges, while still maintaining its core values and cultural functions. This in-depth understanding of Asmat carving not only enriches the insights of anthropology and art history, but can also provide valuable insights for strategies to preserve and develop intangible cultural heritage in the modern era.

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