I have examined the final copy of this project for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Cultural Anthropology, emphasis in Museum Studies.

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Dr. David Hughes, Committee Chair

We have read this project and recommend its acceptance

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Jerry Martin, M.A., Committee Member

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Dr. Robert Lawless, Committee Member

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Dr. Anthony Gythiel, Committee Member
Dedication

This project is dedicated to my family, the faculty and staff of the Anthropology department at Wichita State University, the staff of the Lowell D. Holmes Museum, the Crosier Brothers and the Asmat people.
Acknowledgements

This project is the culmination of my life-long dream of earning a Master’s Degree. It has taken me many years to get here, and I have many people to thank for their encouragement, patience and support.

Thank you to my children for their understanding of the times when their mother was busy researching and working. My daughter, Megan, volunteered to spend time with me cataloguing and cleaning artifacts, and I enjoyed it a great deal. My son, Duncan, never complained when he had to tag along and play video games while I worked. We got to watch the campus gardens grow together, and had a wonderful time.

I also want to thank my grandmother, Nellie, who stayed with my children so I could take evening classes and constantly praised and encouraged me. And thanks also to my mother, Nancy, for being my role model. She proved to me that an advanced degree could be accomplished, even with children and work responsibilities. From her I inherited my lifelong love of learning. She is my hero.

I could not have completed this project without the help and guidance of my professors, Dr. Anthony Gythiel, Dr. David Hughes, Dr. Robert Lawless and Jerry Martin. To Jerry, especially, I am forever indebted. He hired me as curator and introduced me to the wonderful, colorful world of the Asmat. His joy and enthusiasm for museum work is infectious, and inspired me to learn and do more than I ever imagined. I looked forward to going to work every day. He is a wonderful boss and outstanding instructor.

I also wish to thank Sue Cowdery, Shawnie Imbert, Sabrina Klutzke, Julie Schrader, Troy Belford, Andrew Francis, Phyllis Hischier and the entire staff of the Holmes Museum, as well as Barry and Paula Downing, for their tireless and generous efforts to help bring this project to fruition.

And finally, thank you to Pat Stepanek and Shannon Kraus for making sure I kept my sense of humor.
Abstract

At present, there are several books written on the Asmat of New Guinea, as well as many artifactual collections throughout the world, both large and small. However, this information is scattered, poorly presented, and proves to be an impediment to research. Additionally, the cultural and art museums which currently house Asmat objects have not utilized emerging technology to reach a large audience, either for research or general educational purposes.

Therefore, to address these problems I have gathered all relevant data into one source that is as definitive as possible, and that can be easily accessed both by the curious as well as potential ethnographers, researchers and travelers. To this end, I have created a website for the purpose of presenting the Downing and Bakwin Asmat collections to the lay public, as well as providing a research hub for anthropologists and others interested in the Asmat. This website contains a comprehensive bibliography, photographs of artifacts in the Holmes Museum collection, relevant data on each piece, links to other collections and websites of interest and/or research. It includes cultural information on the Asmat including, but not limited to, their cosmology, myths, rituals and the making of the pieces in the Collection. The website will eventually also provide audio-visual recordings from various ethnographic field trips to New Guinea since initial contact by the Wichita State University Department of Anthropology beginning in 2001.
In this paper, I discuss the Asmat and describe the process which was undertaken to bring the website to fruition. There have been various difficulties with this project, but I am confident that the Holmes Museum website will serve as an example to other museums throughout the world, and will hopefully usher in a new standard for education and outreach between lay patrons, researchers and museums.

The Lowell D. Holmes Museum Asmat web page is located at:

http://holmes.anthropology.museum/asmat/
HOW THE ASMAT CAME TO BE

The Myth of Fumeripitsj

One day Fumeripitsj and his best friend Mbuirepitsj went to fish and saw two women on the opposite shore. The women called to them and the men hurried over. The men each chose one of the women as a mate for himself and life was pleasant for a time.

Soon, Mbuirepitsj discovered that Fumeripitsj was having an affair with his girlfriend. He became angry, and took their only canoe away, leaving Fumeripitsj behind. With no way left to travel, Fumeripitsj had to rely upon his girlfriend Teweraot to take him in her canoe down the river. Wanting to keep his presence secret, Teweraot tied Fumeripitsj in leaves to hide him in the canoe, and then insisted the other women in their party go off ahead so he wouldn’t be seen. But there came a great wave, and Fumeripitsj was knocked out of the canoe.

Being tied in the leaves, Fumeripitsj could not swim and was drowned. His body washed up on an island where many birds hunted for food. On seeing him, the birds debated whether to eat him or not. They decided it would be best to try to save him, so they sent for the great sea eagle named War. War came bringing medicine, and soon Fumeripitsj was raised from the dead.

Fumeripitsj returned to the mainland where he built a large Jeu (men’s house), and carved many small bis of men and women. He then began to drum, and as he danced the bis carvings came to life. He quickly ran from the Jeu, leaving axes behind for the people to find for their own use. Fumeripitsj repeated his building and carving in many places, bringing life to the Asmat, as well as their neighbors.
Villages and Cultural Sub-areas Represented in the Holmes Museum Asmat Collection

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The Asmat are a sedentary tribal group in the southwestern coastal sections of New Guinea. They occupy an area on the western half of New Guinea Island, which is the Indonesian province of Papua. It covers roughly 10,425 square miles (27,000 km²). In the north are the Maoke Mountains, with the island’s highest peak rising 16,500 feet (5,029m). To the southwest is the Arafura Sea. The Asmat area is located on a gentle alluvial plain which extends far out into the sea. Because of this, the coastal region is made up of mud and swamp, and the water level on land rises and lowers with the tide. During high tide, the ocean can cover up to 1.2 miles (2 km) of land along the coast. Further inland, the land is higher and covered by dense jungle. There is an extensive network of deep and wide rivers running through Asmat which create dangerous cross-currents where they flow into the sea.

The Asmat live only a few degrees south of the equator, so there are no true seasons. The average daily temperature ranges between 70º F (21º C) at night to 90º F (32º C) during the hottest part of the day. Rainy season in the eastern portion runs from April to June, and in the west from December to March. Yearly rainfall is approximately 200 inches (500 cm).

They inhabit a lush tropical region filled with many species of birds, plants and animals. The coastal region is a tidal swamp area; the ground is covered by sea water during high tide and a muddy swamp when the tide is out. As you travel inland the ground level rises and the tidal swamp disappears.
The Asmat region receives approximately 200 inches of rain per year. Thus, most areas are unsuitable for farming, as the nearly constant rains leech the soil of nutrients needed for growing anything other than native plants. The most important plant to the Asmat is the Sago Palm (*Metroxylon sagu*). Its pith is processed into sago flour which is the staple of their diet. The Asmat also hunt and fish, as well as gather native foods.

There are no roads in Asmat due to the swampy, thick jungle undergrowth. Therefore, travel is either on foot or along the intertwining network of rivers by canoe. Asmat villages are generally located along these rivers. The village populations are usually small, varying from a few hundred to a few thousand persons. In 2000, their total population was estimated at between 65,000-70,000.

The Asmat are a patrilineal and patrilocal society. Wives may come from either a separate clan within the village, or another village from the wider area. Women are deemed ready for marriage shortly after puberty, and traditionally a bride price was paid for their hand.

Houses are built using the abundant plant materials in the area. Homes generally consist of an extended family including a couple, their children, and the husband’s parents. A new couple first lives in the parents’ home, and a new house is then built after the arrival of their first child.

In each village there are at least two large ceremonial houses called *Jeu*. The *Jeu* has separate entrances and cooking areas for each family belonging to the *Jeu* clan unit. Asmat men spend much of their time in the *Jeu* organizing ceremonies, telling stories, planning hunting and fishing expeditions, as well as carving their incredible artwork.
Women are allowed in the Jeu only at certain times, usually related to ceremonies and feasts.

For the Asmat, the physical and spiritual worlds are constantly intertwined. Every carving, decoration or tool of daily life represents some aspect of the spirit world. The Asmat believe that it is only when the spiritual and physical worlds are in harmony that the village will be happy and healthy. Therefore, ceremonies are the focal point of their lives. These ceremonies remind them of their earthly obligations to relatives who have passed away, and create a link with ancestors who can be called upon to assist them in their daily lives.

Prior to the coming of missionaries, the Asmat were cannibals and headhunters. The Catholic Crosier Brothers were the first group to open a lasting missionary settlement, begun in 1953, and have been instrumental in documenting Asmat culture. According to their website,

The Order was founded in the year 1210 by Blessed Theodore de Celles and his companions. The name Crosier is derived from the French croises; those signed with the cross. In medieval England, Crosiers were known as the Crutched (crossed) Friars. The designation refers to the cross and the spirituality of the Order. The primary feast of the Crosiers, the Exaltation of the Cross, reflects a spirituality focused on the triumphal cross of Christ and the glorified Lord. A distinctive mark of the Crosiers is the red and white crusaders' cross worn on the scapular of their religious habit. We are members of the Canons Regular of the Order of the Holy Cross, one of the Roman Catholic Church’s oldest orders of religious men. The route to God for a Crosier is the desire to imitate Christ through his union of mind and heart in community, through a mixed life of liturgical prayer and ministry, through the emphatic promise as a Religious to say “yes” to God, through our membership in and service to the wider people of God, and, finally, by our engagement with the world. We seek to be an evangelical leaven within our society and to announce the Good News in the midst of our life together in the world. 19
After ministering to the Asmat for many years, the tribes gave up the headhunting and cannibalistic aspects of their culture. However, the Crosiers have encouraged the Asmat to keep most of their traditions alive and vibrant. Toward this end, the Brothers have helped sponsor a highly popular yearly auction and art contest to showcase Asmat talent to the world, and promote a greater understanding of their culture. They have also helped open a museum of Asmat art and culture, and have laboriously documented much of Asmat culture, daily life, language, ritual and mythology.
A BRIEF HISTORY OF WESTERN CONTACT WITH THE ASMAT

First contact with the Asmat was a sighting from the deck of a Dutch trading ship in 1623. Captain Cook later landed in Asmat territory on September 3, 1770. But the fierce display by the Asmat so frightened the crew that they made a hasty retreat.

The Dutch held Asmat territory from 1793-1949, but did not begin explorations of the area until the early 1900s. The first explorers sent zoological and artifact specimens back to Europe, where they were received with curiosity and enthusiasm. The Dutch eventually established a colonial post in 1938. During World War II the post was temporarily closed.

In 1953, Fr. Zegwaard, a Dutch missionary, reestablished the post at Agats, to serve as both a government center and a base for missionaries. This post became the permanent post of the Catholic Crosier Brothers in 1958. The Crosier missionaries, who often had anthropology training or degrees, discouraged the practices of headhunting and cannibalism, while encouraging the Asmat to retain many other traditional rituals and festivals. Some of these were eventually incorporated into the Catholic liturgy in the area.

Indonesia received its independence from the Dutch in 1949, but the Dutch retained control of the western half of New Guinea, including the Asmat region, until 1962. Then the Asmat area became part of Indonesia. In 1963, to end headhunting, the Indonesian government burned down all ceremonial houses (Jeus), actively discouraged Asmat ritual and festivals, and severely limited dancing and drumming. This crackdown lasted until 1968.
The Crosier Brothers, with Bishop Sowada as their lead spokesperson, intervened to stop the destructive policy of the Indonesian government. They expressed the importance of ceremony and ritual in Asmat life, declaring that “without art and ritual the Asmat culture could not continue”.

To aid in the resurgence of Asmat art and ritual, the United Nations underwrote a project from 1968 to 1974 to encourage carving. Later, under the combined efforts of Bishop Sowada, Tobias Schneebaum and Gunter and Ursula Konrad, the Asmat Museum for Culture and Progress was opened in the early 1980s. Today, the Museum hosts an annual woodcarving competition and auction that has stimulated artistic creativity among the Asmat, and has become an economic boon to the carvers, who are recognized throughout the world for the richness and quality of their carvings.

In 2000, the Asmat founded the Lembaga Musyawarah Adat Asmat (LMAA) to work with the Indonesian government on behalf of the interests of the Asmat people. In 2004, the Asmat region became a separate governmental administration, with its own elected head.
ASMAT DAILY LIFE

In Asmat culture, there is a distinct division of labor between the sexes. This is reflected also in their ritual life, living quarters and child rearing. They are a patrilineal society, and women are expected to conform to traditional mores and roles.

From birth, females are taught to help their mothers, and are prepared for their adult duties within the family and village. Girls follow their mothers on daily chores such as fishing, sago processing, and gathering of wild food, or, if they are too small, are left in the care of female relatives while their mother is away. By the age of five, they are generally expected to gather their share of food, and help with cooking and other tasks within the home.

Asmat girls play and interact with both peer groups and older women of their village. They participate in a parallel puberty rite with the young men when they are of age, and are then deemed eligible to marry. Before they are betrothed, however, there is often sexual activity with a favored young man out in the jungle away from prying eyes. This behavior is not officially condoned, but there is no punishment either. Adults simply look the other way as long as some measure of discretion by the young people is observed, and no pregnancy results.

Potential mates are usually known to the girls, and often already well liked, as there are many opportunities within ceremonial contexts to observe and speak to each other. Girls generally value a young man who is a good dancer, drummer, and/or singer during ceremonies, and those who are physically attractive. Also finding favor are men who are known to be good hunters, and, traditionally, those who had proven themselves in battle.
When a suitor takes an interest in a girl, he makes his wishes known to her family. And while the father and other male relatives ultimately make the decision, the girl is usually consulted. If she is against the match and has valid reasons, the father will often abide by her wishes and the match is denied. This is uncommon, but can and does occasionally occur. Generally, however, the match is approved by all and a bride price is settled on.

As for male children, there are many differences in upbringing from their female counterparts. Males spend their early childhood at home with their mother and extended family. When they are old enough, their fathers and male relatives outfit them with smaller versions of adult weapons and they are taken along on hunting trips. Boys are encouraged through praise when they bring down small game.

As they mature, they spend more time in the men’s house (Jeu) than at home. It is here that they are told the myths of their culture and educated in the practical lore about life. As young men they learn to weave bags and body masks, make knives and other hunting tools, and to carve the wooden pieces that are integral to Asmat spiritual and ritual life. They also spend a great deal of time with their agemates in horseplay and typical boyhood pursuits.

When a group of males in the village reach puberty, they are sequestered in a special house with a few men to look after them and instruct them in their future duties as husbands, fathers and warriors in their community. At the end of their confinement, a Wuramon ceremony ensues, at the end of which they are admitted as full adult members in the community, ready for marriage and responsibilities.
ASMAT DIET AND FOOD PROCUREMENT

The Asmat diet consists primarily of what can be gathered or caught in their environment. Western encroachment and business dealings have made other items available as well, but they constitute only a small portion of the current diet. Here, I will discuss the traditional diet. Protein sources include those hunted or captured by both men and women, and carbohydrates consist mainly of the pith of the sago palm.

Women are responsible for catching marine and freshwater foods, which most often include crabs, various fish species, and shrimps. Two tools are primarily used to catch this type of prey. The first is nets of varying designs, and the second is the fishing spear. This type of spear is a bamboo pole with several long wooden stakes tied together at the end. To catch fish, the women stand still in the water until a fish is spotted. Then the spear is thrown at the fish, skewering it on the stakes.

It is the men’s responsibility to hunt prey for the family. Sources of meat include wild boar, cuscus (Spilocuscus maculatus and Spilocuscus rufoniger), the occasional crocodile, and various birds including the hornbill, cassowary, ibis, heron, and several species of cockatoo. Their feathers or pelts are also used for clothing and decoration. Three weapons are used for hunting: bows and arrows, spears and knives.

Bows and arrows are used in both warfare and hunting. They are made from a piece of wood, with a strip of rattan as the drawstring. Most bows are undecorated, but a few have cassowary claws at the tip. They make a wide variety of arrows each with their own specific use. There are multi-pronged arrows to hunt for birds, and barbed arrows for larger animals.
Spears are made of wood and were traditionally used in warfare as well as hunting. All have carved points – most a single point, but some have a trident or harpoon shaped tip. A few also have cassowary claws attached to the points. Most have barbs carved just under the point to cause additional damage to the victim or prey when they are removed. Many also have decorative panels at the neck. The shafts can be plain or with sections of carved designs.

Some spears also have a decorative sheath near the end. Only warriors with an established record of killing in warfare are allowed to add these ornaments. The sheaths are made of crocheted plant fibers with decorative feather tassels from various birds. The tassels may also have cassowary quills or seeds as beads.

Knives are used for hunting as well as stripping bark from trees, and cutting handmade rope. They were also traditionally used as weapons in war and headhunting. Ceremonially, they are brandished by men, and sometimes women, during mock battles. Knives are made from the long bones of wild pigs or bamboo. Their hilts are decorated with tassels of beads and feathers attached to a woven mesh covering.

Lastly, and of most importance, is the carbohydrate staple of the Asmat diet which is procured jointly by the men and women. The source is the sago palm (*Metroxylon sagu*). Every part of this tree is used: the pith is eaten and makes body paints; the fronds make shingles and baskets; and the branches are used for walls in homes. Each family has its own sago area in the jungle, which is passed down to children and in-laws.

It takes the sago palm eight to fifteen years to reach maturity. After it flowers, it dies, so it must be harvested when it is old enough to supply the maximum amount of pith before its life cycle ends. A single mature palm tree yields 50-350 pounds of processed
sago flour, which stays fresh enough to use for at least two weeks. The flour is rolled into balls, or wrapped in banana leaves and cooked on an open fire.

Processing sago takes the majority of one day. Very early, family members rise and go to their sago area, choosing an appropriate tree to fell. The men clear moss and thorns off the bark, and remove several strips on one side down to the pith. The tree is laid down and the men and women take turns chopping the pith using special sago pounders – elbow-shaped wooden implements with a bamboo covering over the tool end, and often intricately carved with spiritual designs. A sluice is made from frond spines propped against a wooden back, and a trough is added to the bottom. A screen of rattan mesh is then set near the base to filter the starch from the water in the sluice.

After pounding the sago pith, the women stand at the top of the sluice and use a large shell to scoop water into it. They squeeze a handful of pith with the water several times, rinsing the starch and water down the sluice. Large pieces of worked pith are then discarded at their feet. When the process is complete the sago starch is brushed out of the sluice with natural fiber brushes, packed together, sliced into chunks, and placed in woven bags to be carried home.\textsuperscript{16, 17, 18}
OBJECTS OF NON-RITUAL USE

The Asmat traditionally create many utilitarian objects for use in daily and non-ritual contexts using the bounty of their environment. While in some cases Western objects have replaced the older ones, many traditional items are still used, and sometimes preferred over their modern counterparts. The following categories will briefly discuss some of the traditional objects, their functions and the materials from which they are made.

Ancestor Figures

Ancestor figures are wooden carvings of humans, but in smaller scale. Some are created to reside in the family home as a reminder of a deceased relative, and are “fed” by their owners. Others are made to guard the doors to the feast house (je ti), and to ensure certain spirits associated with ritual do not escape the house and cause trouble. They are also named for deceased ancestors or, in the past, headhunting victims. The figures in the men’s house are considered so powerful that men with small children are admonished to enter the feast house by an unguarded doorway lest their children become sick or die.

Arm Bands and Wrist Guards

Asmat men often wear armbands to carry bone knives on the upper arm. They are made of either woven rattan or boar tusks. The woven bands can be plain or decorated with beads and cassowary feathers. Most men also commonly wear wrist guards of coiled rattan to assist them in using their bows. These guards were a traditionally important part of their travelling kits, before the introduction of matches, and an adjunct to the hunting
and survival items in their bags. When a fire was needed, an Asmat man would take a ball of finely rubbed rattan wool and a bent piece of wood from his bag. The bent wood would serve as tongs, and was placed like a tent over the rattan ball. He then removed the armband and wound it around the tongs. The coil was turned with increasing speed back and forth until the ball of wool caught fire.

*Axes*

The Asmat used axes for many everyday chores, and creating many of their artistic and ceremonial pieces. Axes have wood handles, often elaborately carved. The blades were traditionally of shaped stone. When creating large ceremonial pieces the axe is used not only to cut down the tree, but to outline a rough shape and size for the eventual finished design. They were also used to cut away a portion of a felled tree to gain access to the sago pith. The use of traditional stone axes is a rarity today as they have been replaced by modern metal axes.

*Bags and Baby Carriers* 3, 4

Both men and women in Asmat carry bags. Women use them to transport sago, babies, or other heavy items, while men fill theirs with arrow tips, tobacco and small hunting supplies. Men’s bags are elaborately decorated with feathers, grayish-blue coix seeds (Job’s tears), red abrus seeds, and cassowary quill beads. Women’s bags are usually plain.
Bags are also part of the *Asaro* (*Asa* or *Essa* = bag; *Ro* = decoration) ceremony, to promote harmony between husbands and wives. For this ceremony, the women cut down the *Tine* tree, and use its bark to weave a bag for their husbands. The weaving and decorating can take quite a long time. While they weave, the men are forbidden to eat any hunted food. When the bags are finished, the wives hang them in the *jeu* while they collect sago grubs in the jungle. When the women return, they fill the bags with grubs and present them to their husbands. If any man’s wife feels that he mistreats her or is a bad husband, she will not make him a bag. This embarrasses the husband, and can cause arguments within the family.

**Bowls**

Bowls are an everyday item, but can also be used for ceremony. They are made of either wood or sago bark. Wooden bowls are used for meals or to hold paints. They are shaped much like a canoe, and each end is carved with ancestor or animal figures. Sometimes the bottoms and sides are carved as well, and they are often painted, usually with striped patterns resembling those of canoes.

The long, shoe-box shaped bark bowl, called *An*, is used to hold sago larvae (*Cerambycidae*) during feasts and ceremonies. The leaves are tied together with rattan strips, and sago leaf tassels are tied to the top edges for decoration.
Canoes and Prows

Since there are no roads in Asmat, travel is mainly by canoe down the extensive network of rivers. As with all other aspects of Asmat life and culture, there is significance and ceremony attached to making canoes. This begins with the maker dreaming of the tree he will use to create the new water craft. This tree is cut down and taken back to the village where it is hollowed out.

Everyday canoes for family travel are painted white using lime, and red ochre stripes are added. The prow is often carved with designs from the natural world, and accented with charcoal. The bottom of the canoe is smoked and dabbed with mud from the river in front of the village to introduce it to the place it will spend most of its time. When complete, several men enter the canoe, jumping up and down to splash water into it. Then they row up and down the river, back and forth in front of the village. The canoe must then spend its first day exclusively in the water. After this sequence of events it is ready for use.

Paddles are usually very long, as the Asmat row their canoes while standing. The blades can be plain or carved with traditional designs. Anyone riding in the canoe can have a paddle, but the successful headhunters in the group are the only ones allowed to decorate theirs with other ornaments. These can be a series of small bunches of feathers attached to a ring on the handle, or a long woven sheath with many tassels of feathers and seed beads.

Traditionally, a second type of canoe was made in preparation for taking revenge. The canoe was made to honor someone who had been the victim of headhunting. The brothers-in-law of the victim would ask a carver in the village to create a canoe with a special prow that was made to resemble the dead relative, and then was given the deceased’s name. It was covered with a mat to keep women and children from seeing it. When completed, the fo mbufum ceremony began. The brothers-in-law were given a stick full of sago grubs and a large ball of sago. They got into the canoe and rowed with the food near to the place where their relative was killed. Some of the grubs were dropped in the river to feed the spirits, while the rest were laid briefly down on the land as an offering to the victim. The mat was also removed. The brothers-in-law then took the food back and made a meal of it. It was considered an open threat to the group who had killed their relative, and was the official start of the attempt to avenge the death.
It is Asmat custom that when canoes become worn and unusable, the prow is removed and kept by the family. The rest of the canoe is taken to the jungle and allowed to decay to provide fertilizer for the sago trees.

**Clothing**

Because of modern influence and the work of missionaries, the Asmat now wear typical Western clothing appropriate to the tropical climate. However, traditional clothing is still worn for special occasions, and some daily wear items, such as hats, have not changed.

Woven skirts were once worn only by women, but now are acceptable for men as well. They have a woven plant fiber belt-like waistband, with braided or loose sago leaf tassels which hang down to mid-thigh. Women wore the tassels tied like a loincloth. Now the tassels are worn loosely, and sometimes under Western clothing.

Woven or beaded belts and vests, and feather headdresses are worn by men only. However, the hats made of cuscus pelt are worn by both men and women. They are tied around the head similar to a bandanna with the widest part on the forehead. Also, both men and women wear decorative hair pins. These are made of a slender piece of wood with feathers and beads on one end.

Additionally, when a family member dies, the female relatives make woven pieces out of sago leaves that are worn to indicate they are in mourning. These include arm and leg bands, belts and necklaces. Widows also wear hoods over their hair. After the initial mourning period, the bands are put away, but are worn again on the anniversary of the death.
Containers

The Asmat use the larvae of the Capricorn beetle (*Cerambycidae* family), commonly referred to as a sago worm, as a ceremonial food for many occasions. When a ceremonial feast time is approaching, they will cut down a sago tree and make holes in it to attract a female to lay its eggs. Approximately 30-40 days later the larvae are ready to be harvested. To carry them, a special container is made that resembles a backpack. It is made of hollowed-out wood with woven straps. It is decorated with carved ancestor figures, spiritual symbols or other designs, and is often colored with lime, charcoal and red ochre. Feathers, beads or braided sago leaves may also be attached.

Containers are also made to carry drinking water. These are of bamboo and have a small branch at one end that can be used to carry them.

Jewelry

In their headhunting days, many items were used to remind the people in the village of the need to avenge a death. These items were collectively called *etsjo pok*. One of these was a necklace made of dog’s teeth. It was named for the person to be avenged, and was worn as a constant reminder. It could be worn by a family member of the deceased or given to others. When someone accepted the dog’s teeth necklace as a gift, it was understood that when the time came they would help the avenger in his attack.

Other items associated with the past are head-hunting necklaces. These consist of a pendant of bamboo or wood, worn on a string around the neck. The pendants are often carved with designs on their faces, and can sometimes be in the shape of a human figure.
Most strings are decorated with beads. The necklaces were only worn by men who were successful head hunters.

A common jewelry item among the Asmat is the nosepiece. It is usually worn by men, but women sometimes do as well. They are a traditional decoration for ceremonies and feasts, but may also be worn daily as a matter of personal preference. One type is fashioned from two shaped pieces of shell fastened together to resemble curved pig tusks. This type is called a *bipane*, and its shape is often borrowed as a design on shields, drums and other carved or woven items. A second type is made from the hind leg bone of pigs. These are often carved with openwork designs, and flare at the ends. This variety is called an *och* or *ofeiti*.

**Miscellaneous and Contemporary Carvings**

There are some carvings which the Asmat create that do not fit easily into set categories. These may include special pieces made to commemorate a significant event, updating of traditional items, and other odds and ends of daily life.

**Carved Skulls**

During the Asmat headhunting period, the skulls of both one’s enemies and ancestors were kept indefinitely. Ancestors’ skulls, including the jawbone, were elaborately decorated and kept in the home as protection, and to keep the loved one’s memory alive. The skulls of headhunting victims, without the jawbone, were also kept in the home, but were often only barely decorated, if at all.
Occasionally, one of the headhunting victim’s skulls became lost or damaged. When this occurred, a wooden skull was carved to replace the lost item. This was important because of the need for Asmat warriors to keep track of the number of deaths they had avenged over their lifetime, and as an outward sign of their prowess.

**Crocodile Carvings**

Crocodiles carvings are very lifelike, and average nearly two-thirds the length of a live animal. They are carved in memory of those killed by the creatures, which was a very common occurrence in previous times. Intensive hunting in recent years has greatly lowered the population of crocodiles, however occasional deaths still occur.

**Contemporary Carvings**

Contemporary carvings are made for sale, to adorn churches or simply as home decor. In the Holmes Museum collection these include large ancestor poles, a woven bag made to resemble a person, and carvings for submission in the annual art contest. Demand from tourists, art enthusiasts and museums from around the world have made these pieces profitable for the Asmat, who use the extra income to purchase items such as metal tools, tobacco and canned food.

**Musical Instruments**

Musical instruments are an extremely important aspect of Asmat life. They were traditionally part of headhunting and warfare, as well as ceremony. Although they no longer practice headhunting, mouth harps, flutes and bull-roarers – along with drums and horns – still play a key role in modern Asmat daily and ceremonial life.
Flutes

Called *durifos* by the Asmat, these are usually made from bamboo, or sometimes of wood. In the Emari Ducur area they are used to call a spirit into a tree before cutting it down to carve an *omu*. They are also used at the end of the ceremony to release the spirit.

Bull-Roarers

These instruments are called *piwas*, and are made from the *Amowo* tree. They are flat pieces of wood, generally oval shaped, with string attached through a hole in the top. They are swung in a circle, making a whirling noise the Asmat call *gisake*. The sound indicates to the carvers whether a good or bad spirit is in the tree – if it is a bad spirit, they choose another tree for carving. *Piwas* are also used at certain times throughout the carving of an *omu*.

Mouth Harps

Mouth harps are made of bamboo. The instrument is placed near the mouth and air is blown across it. The pitch of the sound can be changed by pulling a string or using a finger to vibrate the middle “tongue” piece. Mouth harps are generally played for amusement and are not used in ceremonies.

Drums 3, 8, 15

One night, a seven-year-old boy had a dream. In the dream was a *Jeu*, and a man inside was beating a drum. He gave the boy a drum. When the child awoke, he was confused and looked all around him for the drum from his dream. Unable to find it, he asked his parents to give him one. They had no idea what he meant, as they had never seen a drum before. The boy cried for several days, and his parents were unable to console him.
One day, his father instructed the boy’s mother to prepare a large amount of sago, as they were going on a trip. The boy and his father rowed in their canoe for three days and nights until they came to a Jeu. Inside was a man beating a drum. The father told the man of his son’s dream. The man then explained to the father and son how to make a drum. He instructed them which wood to cut, how to hollow it out, and how to fashion a head from lizard skin tied on with rattan. Finally, he gave the child a drum of his own.

The father and son returned to their village with the drum, to the amazement of his mother. And to this day, the Asmat make drums in this way.

Asmat drums are part of everyday life and contain a great deal of spiritual energy, so it is not surprising that they would be the subject of myth. They are an integral part of all ceremonies and rituals, as well as an accompaniment to nearly all village songs, both public and private.

In some locales, the drummer must carve his own instrument. In other areas, when someone in the village wishes to have a drum made they ask a wow-ipits (master carver) to do the job, and pay him with food or trade goods for his service. However, in each case, the process is the same.

The carver goes to the jungle and selects an appropriate tree that is slender and of the proper diameter, and cuts a trunk section slightly larger than the finished product. The inner pulp is removed using water and a digging stick, which takes about three days. Next, it is dried over a fire in the jeu for several days, and any additional shaping is done using hot embers. Then the outer layers are chopped away with an axe, leaving a rough handle shape, and the surface is smoothed. Lastly, the handle and surface are carved with
decorative shapes, if desired, and the entire finished product is polished with charcoal. Pigments may also be applied to the carved designs, according to the taste of the craftsperson.

Drum heads are made using the skin of a lizard. It is attached to the top of the drum using an adhesive made from the blood of one leg of the person who commissioned the drum (or the carver), mixed with ground aquatic shells. A rattan strip is then wound several times around the top of the drum to further secure the skin. To tune the drum to the desired pitch, small balls of wax or sap are placed on the head in the appropriate place and melted onto the skin head over a fire. The finished drum is kept in a place of honor in the drummer’s home or the jeu until it is time to be used in singing and dancing.

**Horns** ¹, ³, ⁴

The *fu* (horn) is made from bamboo or wood. It can be very plain, or carved with decorative and spiritual symbols covering its surface. The horn was traditionally used to give the signal to attack an enemy, as well as to alert the tribe to the successful return of a war or headhunting party after a raid.

The horn is also used in two parts of the *bis* ceremony. When it is time to make the pole, a small group of men go out to the jungle to select an appropriate tree to carve. On their way back to the village, they sound the horn to alert the village they are returning successfully. The next day, all the men go out to the chosen tree, blowing the horn as they near the place to catch the attention of their ancestors’ spirits and as a warning to their friends and enemies that there will soon be a *bis* ceremony.
**Pillows**

As mentioned previously, the skulls of deceased loved ones were at one time kept in the home. These were beautifully decorated and were thought to help keep the family healthy. They were also often used as pillows. When the Asmat began to practice Christianity, they stopped keeping the heads of their loved ones. In the southern coastal region of Safan, elaborately carved cylindrical wooden pillows took the place of skulls, and were named after the deceased family member.

**Pipes**

Pipes are used by both women and men for smoking tobacco. Tobacco was introduced into Asmat, and is not a native plant. Pipes are made of bamboo and are often carved with intricate designs. Due to the widening of trade areas, the pipe is less commonly used today in favor of cigarettes.

**Tools**

The Asmat use many tools in daily life including those for carving, crocheting and cooking. Today’s tools are often modern metal implements, but traditionally metal was seldom used, as it was difficult to come by except through trade.

Crochet hooks are made of bone and shaped like those that can be found in any Western crafts shop. String made from natural plant fiber is used by women to make fishing nets and items worn for mourning, and by men to make bags and body masks.
Tongs for cooking are made of flexible rattan, and also resemble modern kitchen utensils.

Carving tools in the Lowell D. Holmes Museum collection are made of wooden shafts, and some have metal tips. One piece is used to carve canoe prows. It is also poked into sago trees to test the moisture content to determine if the pith is suitable for harvest. The remainder of the carving tools in the collection are used to make canoes.

**Additional Miscellaneous Objects**

**Stones and Coral** ¹²

There is very little stone in the Asmat area of New Guinea, so it is considered very valuable. Coral is used in its natural state, but stone is worked into useful shapes for special functions. A description and explanation of their functions is listed below.

*Holed stones:* There are two stones of this type in the Holmes Museum collection. One is oval shaped and its precise use is unknown. The square-shaped stone was used in headhunting. A spear was placed through the hole, and the spear was held under the chin of the victim while canoeing out to sea. The body was then washed in the waters, and the fighting abilities of the victim passed into the person who killed them.

*Star stones:* These stones get their name from their resemblance to a four-pointed star. They were used in headhunting to create a hole in the skull of the victim in order to remove the brain. At one time, they were also occasionally used by a potential groom’s family as part of a bride price.
**Coral:** Coral is thought to have magic properties. When an Asmat runs out of arrows and spears during battle, the magic in the coral is used to attack the enemy.

**Jaw Holder**

Traditionally, a youth in Asmat society was not considered truly a man until he had made his first human kill. Often his wife or mother-in-law would tease him about this to encourage him to fulfill this duty. When he did at last make his first kill, the youth would present his wife or mother-in-law with the jawbone in a type of necklace made of rattan, and decorated with tied sago leaf tassels, in order to show off to the village. The young man would then keep the top portion of the skull as a reminder of the event, and as proof of his prowess.
RITUAL OBJECTS AND THEIR ASSOCIATED MYTHS AND CEREMONIES

According to Asmat cosmology, the spirit world and our own are mirror images. What happens in one is reflected in the other. Spirits are around them all the time – some benign, some harmful. Keeping a balance between the two is all important. To this end, many ceremonies and feast cycles are utilized to maintain this equilibrium. These include the cycles surrounding the *bis*, the *wuramon*, the *doroe*, and the *omu*, as well as the ritual uses of shields and woven mats.

The Asmat use three colors in their artwork and body decoration: red, black and white. Each is made of different materials, and each has a specific significance. All are liberally used in the carving of ceremonial objects.

Red is made from either a yellow mud, which turns red when burned, or another mud which is naturally red. Red painted around a person’s eyes imitates those of the black King Cockatoo, a bird associated with headhunting prowess. When used on canoes, it gives them added speed and agility in the water. On ancestor carvings, *omus* and *bis* poles, it marks body scarifications.

Black is made from crushed burned firewood (charcoal). Men paint their bodies with it to give them strength. It is used on ancestor figures, *omus* and *bis* poles to color hair, and sometimes joints. It is also thought to alleviate pain and help wounds to heal.

White is made from burned mussel shells, or white clay in areas where mussels are unavailable. Canoes are covered in white as a base color to impart protection and strength. On ancestor figures, *omus* and *bis* poles white is used to signify flesh. Burned shells or sago flour are often used as body paint. The shell powder is also thrown in the
air at the approach of strangers toward the village, or before battle to intimidate the
enemy and stir up the warriors’ enthusiasm.

THE STORY OF THE BIS

There are two main myths surrounding the origin of the bis pole. The first comes from
the Becembub region and focuses on the Asmat beliefs regarding avenging the deaths of
family members. The second is from the Bismam region and relates the sadness felt in the
wake of the death of a loved one, as well as the longing to keep their memory alive.

Beworpits

There once were two brothers named Seitakap and Tewer who lived in a village
plagued with frequent sickness and often the target of warfare. Seitakap was a happy man
who spoke loudly, and his brother repeatedly warned him to keep his voice down lest
someone overhear him and attack.

Far away, in the village of Sitan, Beworpits lived with his wife and children. One day
he told his wife he was going hunting for human flesh. Upon hearing the loud voice of
Seitakap, Beworpits attacked and killed him. He took Seitakap’s head and body back to
his village for a feast.

From the fire, the bones of Seitakap spoke to Beworpits and told him that he was not
really dead. Seitakap had paddled west on the river and arrived at the land of his
ancestors, where everyone lived happily and in peace. The ancestors had asked Seitakap
to return to teach Beworpits a new custom to gain the help of the ancestors in warfare and
daily life. The men were to sing a new song for the feast, and must carve the likeness of
their dead into wood. They were to smear the blood of a head-hunting victim on the carving to seal their dedication to the ancestor they had carved.

From that time forward, the Asmat made the bis to remember their dead and remind them of their responsibility to avenge their loved ones’ deaths.

**Mbis**

In the village of Kaimo lived a woman named Mbis who was married to a man named Darew. Darew was very jealous and had a nasty temper. He kept Mbis indoors at all times so she would not run away, not even allowing her outside to bathe. Mbis’ parents, as well as the villagers were horrified at Darew’s treatment of Mbis, and they tried to talk sense into him. Darew simply refused to listen.

One day while Darew was out fishing, Mbis’ parents rescued her from her house, and took her by canoe to the mouth of the Sitan River. They left Mbis there and went back to their village. Darew was very upset to find Mbis gone, but the villagers took no pity on him because of his bad behavior. He wept and mourned until he died.

Meanwhile, Mbis was befriended by a female cassowary bird who agreed to be her foster mother. Several days later near sundown they heard someone blowing a horn. They went to seek out the source the next morning and came upon a woman named Teweraut and her husband, Beworpits. They agreed to take Mbis to their village to marry their son, Pupurpits, hiding her under mats on the canoe voyage home.

Mbis was very happy with her new husband, who thought she was very beautiful. One day Mbis went fishing and Pupurpits missed her very much. He wanted to keep his bride near to him, so he carved a tree in her likeness and named it after her. After seeing Pupurpits’ carving, all the villagers thought it a wonderful idea and began making
carvings of their own loved ones who were no longer with them. From that day onward, all Asmat carve *bis* in remembrance of their deceased loved ones.

*Bis* poles are large carvings, generally over eight feet in height. They are placed upright in front of the *jeu* during the *bis* ceremony. They are made from the trunk of a mangrove tree, and usually a single root is left in place – however, up to three have been seen. This root becomes a projection at the top of the pole called a *tsjimen*, which is the phallus of the pole. The top figure is made to represent the ancestor being honored or avenged. Other figures are carved in succession down the length of the pole, all touching the ones above and below them. These additional figures are other relatives of the person being honored, those who have preceded him in death. They may be his children, a wife, mother, father, or other close relative. The pole terminates in a point or canoe shape, which in Asmat tradition stands for the female principle.

*Bis* poles are carved by the *wow-ipits* (master carvers) of the village, as they are the only ones deemed skilled enough to correctly perform the work. Other male relatives of the deceased assist in smaller parts of the carving process, and it is they who put the final touches of pigments on the pole. The eyes are carved last, just before the ceremony begins, as the Asmat believe that the spirit of the deceased in the pole will awaken at this time, and they wish to avoid his escape before the ceremony is begun.

At the conclusion of the ceremony the spirit is released from the pole, and it is taken to the jungle. There it is broken and left to decay to fertilize the sago plots. This traditionally served as an open declaration of hostility toward the killer of the person being honored, and marked the official beginning of the burden of avenging their death.
THE WURAMON AND INITIATION

When there are enough boys in a village of the appropriate age, an initiation ceremony is begun. At this time, a special temporary house, called an Emaktsjim, is constructed so that the initiates will be isolated from the rest of the village. Here they stay for several days as the final preparations are made. They are not allowed to eat during their wait. Traditionally, the head of a slain victim of battle was placed in each boy’s lap, and he would remain sitting with it for the duration of the ceremony. The boy would take on the name and character of the victim as a part of himself. In the future, when visiting the victim’s family in another village, he would be called by the victim’s name and welcomed by the victim’s family. It is unknown what substitutes for the head now that headhunting is no longer practiced.

During the boys’ isolation, a wuramon (soul ship) is constructed to aid in the ceremony, as well as to help the spirits of recently deceased ancestors pass to Safan – the Asmat afterworld. A wuramon is a hollow-bottomed canoe with many carved figures. It is carved behind the temporary house during the day, and hidden by sago leaves at night. In the middle is a turtle figure, called a bu, which is a symbol of fertility because of the large number of eggs it lays. Next to the turtle is a Z-shaped figure called okom. It represents a sea monster, which is the most evil of all spirits. The remainder of the canoe is filled with figures called ambirak. They represent the spirits of the ancestors who have recently died. They may be in human or bird form. Then the outside of the wuramon is painted white with red stripes – the coloring of their working canoes. Lastly, the figures are painted and adorned with braided sago leaves, seed beads or feathers. It is then taken into the temporary house until the ceremony.
On the day of the initiation ceremony, villagers go out to the jungle to collect sago grubs and other foods to share. When they return, two women decorated with feathers in their hair and red ochre paint on their faces, enter the temporary house. They represent the ancestral mothers of each clan of the jeu (upriver and downriver). They unwrap the wuramon and unseal the main door of the initiates’ house. The men then lift the wuramon and poke the prow in and out of the door twice. The third time it is taken out to the river and symbolically launched to take the spirits of the dead to Safan, as their families weep for them. It is brought back up to the porch of the temporary house, and a boy of the village who is too young to be initiated is taken in the house and held up by his ankles. Village men pretend to shoot him with arrows and poke him with spears.

Next, the chief drummer comes out and puts his foot on the okom as the women hiss in disgust and disapproval of the sea monster. The initiates then emerge single-file and put each of their feet in turn on the okom as well. The boys are laid down on the porch with their heads facing the wuramon and their uncles paint their bodies red, black and white, and decorate them with feathers. The boys are struck with banana stalks to encourage physical growth, and then all go home to eat, coming back together to drum, sing and dance all night.

The next morning, the initiates are taken out on the river by canoe. As their elders row, the boys mimic growing old and dying – symbolic of the death of their former selves. Each boy’s uncle then immerses him in the river, and he is reborn. On the way back home, they go through the actions of being infants, toddlers and young children, as their elders instruct them in all they need to know about life as an Asmat. By the time they return home, the boys are back to their true age. They gather food, then go home and feed
their families to symbolically show they can provide for the village. They are now considered men. The wuramon is taken to the jungle and left to decay to fertilize the sago trees the Asmat will someday eat of.

**THE ORPHAN MYTH**

This myth is re-enacted as part of the Mask Feast, and the role of the spirit is sometimes taken on by an adult villager who has no living family. At the conclusion of the feast, this man is adopted into a new family who will help care for him.

A long time ago there lived a boy who was an orphan. He lived alone in a small hut at the edge of the village, without any relatives to feed or care for him. He continually begged for food from the villagers, but was always turned away in scorn. Starving, he tried to steal food, but was caught and reprimanded.

Finally, in desperation, the boy decided to make a mask to frighten the women returning from the jungle with food. He hid behind the bushes, and then jumped out as they passed by. The women shouted and dropped all their food as they ran from the “spirit”.

The women complained bitterly to the men about the spirit in the jungle, until they were forced to take action. They went out one day with the women, and managed to catch the spirit. They discovered that it was a boy, and he told them he had frightened the women so he would no longer starve. The village took pity on him and he was adopted into one of the families.

**THE DOROE MASK FEAST**

When an Asmat dies, their spirit will go either directly to Safan (paradise), or make a way-stop in an intermediate place. Safan is full of relatives and friends, and there is
always good weather and plenty to eat. Asmat “limbo” is reserved for those who failed to fulfill a ritual obligation or made a grave social transgression. This in-between realm is marked by constant hunger, lack of shelter and loneliness. In order for these wayward spirits to be released to the paradise of Safan, a ritual must be performed. This feast is called the bi pokomban (or yipai in the coastal regions), and is undertaken every few years for the benefit of all who have passed from the village.

When the time has come for a bi pokomban to be undertaken, the men gather to decide which deceased relatives will be represented. Each mask weaver chosen is an in-law of the deceased, and he is helped by his own close relatives.

Asmat lives revolve around the constant need for balance between the spirit and physical worlds, and this is extremely important during the preparations for the mask feast. There are no quarrels, and any strained relationships are mended. It is also a good time for marriage contracts to be made.

On the official opening day of the mask feast process, Asmat women begin attacking the men in retaliation for abuses against them since the last feast. Unmarried women will also attack unmarried men they fancy as marriage partners. The women use sticks, fire, blunted spears and arrows, as well as daggers in their attack, and the men are not allowed to fight back. Although many men do receive wounds, most are not serious, and the men show great pride in being favored for attention. This attack helps to relieve anger and frustrations that would otherwise harm the peaceful atmosphere necessary to carry out the feast.
When weaving begins, all men not assisting move out of the *jeu* (men’s house) and back into their own family homes to allow plenty of space to the weavers. The village feeds and cares for the needs of the weavers during this period, leaving them free to concentrate only on their work. The masks are full-body length and are woven with string made from plant fibers. They have sago leaf skirts and are often painted. They are also adorned with earrings and nose ornaments, or head decorations of feathers and beads, as local custom dictates. A separate mask called a *manimar* is also made to represent the mythical figure of the orphan (see Orphan Myth, above). It is made of rattan strips in a cone shape, with a skirt. The Asmat of Unir Sirau and Emari Ducur add a flat, carved turtle to the top of their *manimar*.

When the masks are complete, the man in the *manimar* mask appears at the edge of the stream across from the village, and is brought over by canoe. He dances and sways in front of the villagers, occasionally lunging at them suddenly. Finally he charges the crowd and the children pelt him with seed pods, shouting for him to leave the village. The *manimar* is fed in a villager’s hut, then continues to playfully chase the children until they finally drive him from the village.

The next day, in the late afternoon, the spirits arrive. When the villagers spy them, they weep and approach the men in the masks, asking how they are. The relatives of each spirit explain to them all the happenings in the village since their death, and assure the spirit that all is well. There is dancing, singing and drumming until dawn. Then the villagers say their good-byes and the spirits cross over a line of spears laid on the ground. They are now free to enter Safan.
The mask feast is concluded with the *kon* ceremony. In this portion, the mask weavers make rattan and feather armbands for adults that will be adopted into different families within the village. These persons are chosen for some resemblance to deceased relatives, whether based on appearance, habits, hunting prowess or other criteria. Each is given an armband, and receives the name of the deceased person, becoming part of an extended family in addition to his own.

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**THE OMU FEAST**

According to Asmat myth, in the beginning there were two major clans. The spirit named “Joni” (or “Jeni”) whispered to the carvers to make *omus* to bring fertility to the people, and keep them from illness. The bottom part of the tree was the father, and the top the son. Each clan in the village made one *omu* that was exchanged with the other clan to promote harmony. This tradition carries on today, with the bottom part now the older brother, and the top the younger brother.

When the elders decide it is time to make *omus*, there are several steps in the feast cycle. The village men begin by making a special feast house for the *omus*, called the *je ti*. Elders and *wow-ipits* (master carvers) go the jungle to find one very tall tree, or two suitable shorter trees, as *omus* are always made in pairs. The other men prepare logs, bark and sago leaves for constructing the house.

A basic frame is created for the *je ti* with a few leaf walls, and a simple roof which covers only the area where the *omus* are being carved. Then the village women gather sago grubs – larvae of the Capricorn beetle (*Cerambycidae* family) – and sago flour to
share among the villagers. The elders divide the cache of grubs among family groups, and there is joyful feasting.

Next, when the *omus* are almost finished, color is applied and their heads are pushed through a curtain for the villagers to look at from a distance. This is repeated several times over the course of the days leading up to the finished product.

At this time, some men go out hunting wild boar for the feast, while others go back to the jungle to find a mangrove tree with many buttress roots. They cut it down, strip the bark, then shorten the roots and fashion them into hook shapes. The tree is brought to the feast house and is placed upright near the center of the house at the upstream end. It will serve as a post to help hold up the house, as well as a support for the *omus* during the final portion of the feast.

When they are completed, the *omus* are given the names of long-dead war chiefs. Men first, then women, are encouraged to come into the feast house and touch the *omus* to ensure fertility. They are accompanied by singing and dancing. Then the *omus* are tied to long poles. This portion of the ceremony takes most of one day and all night.

The next morning, a portion of the village men arm themselves with bows and spears, and wait on top of the feast house. They represent the spirits of the *omus* who are trying to keep the villagers out. Meanwhile, women and the remaining men storm the house with their own weapons, and a mock battle ensues. When the villagers gain entry into the house, they line up according to families, and all help to lift the *omus* in a cycle of benediction.

Afterward the women leave. The spirits have entered the *omus* and will remain with the village to bless it. They are now fed sago and water, and tied to the rafters of the house.
Then two groups of young men sneak in the back door of the feast house, carrying bundles of sago leaves representing headhunting victims. These are placed on either side of the main fireplace. The bundles are poked with spears in a mock attack, and then the leaves are removed from the spines, which are tied back into bundles. The leaf pieces are burned in two piles, and the spine bundles are tied to the *omus*.

When the feast cycle is complete, all the villagers pitch in to finish the roof and walls of the house before the spirits of the *omus* have time to escape and cause mischief in the village.

*Shields*¹,¹⁶

Shields were once an important part of Asmat warfare and headhunting. They are carved with symbols from the natural world, and are often colored with bright pigments. Many have a figure at the top representing a loved one who was either killed in a headhunting raid, or a family member who was a great hunter and warrior. The shield gives an Asmat man courage and power in battle, and the symbols cause the enemy to fear them (see “Symbols” p. 44)

While warfare no longer occurs, shields are still used in ritual battles and ceremonies. They also are sometimes placed as guards at the rear door of the ceremonial house (*je*) when the men are making secret preparations for village rituals. They keep out dangerous spirits, as well as the women and children, until it is time for the ceremonies to begin.

*RITUAL MATS*¹

A ritual mat, called a *pir*, is woven from natural plant fiber string, generally slightly rectangular in shape. It is decorated with painted and/or woven symbols similar to those used on shields. It was traditionally used in the *pir-jimi* feast – the feast of friendship
pacts. It was most notable in the Sawa-Erma area, but other areas held feasts as well. It cemented bonds between two men or two women, in which the partners could at all times be called upon to give each other help or protection. These friendship bonds lasted a lifetime.

Sago larvae were grown and cultivated, then brought to the men’s house (jeu) for the ceremony. Two tubes were made to contain the larvae, one for men and one for women. The men’s tube consisted of undecorated tied slats. The women’s tube was the beautiful and elaborately woven mat. Each tube was filled to capacity by its respective group, and then the consecrated larvae were shared among pact partners and other adults of the village in a feast to seal the bonds of friendship.

These mats are no longer used ritually, but are still woven and decorated by the women of Sawa-Erma in the Unir Sirau area. They are made for sale to tourists, as well as in the hopes they will be sold or traded to other Asmatters as a traditional item for use in ceremony.
SHARING THE ASMAT: THE MAKING OF A WEBSITE

Modern interaction with the Asmat began in the 1950s with the Catholic Crosier Brothers, as a matter of course in missionary activities. Their intentions, beyond religious conversion, were to understand the Asmat from an insider’s point of view, and record their various customs, beliefs, languages, and rituals for posterity. Through the circulation of their publications, much has been learned about these tribes of New Guinea. Since the Crosiers, others have also spent time in Asmat and have published as well. However, the majority of these dwell almost solely on the artistic achievements of the peoples.

With that in mind, my intention was to focus this project primarily upon the cultural aspects of the Asmat. It is my contention that, although the artistic merits of the Asmat are well worth exploring, much has already been achieved in this area. It is the rich cultural facet which merits far wider scrutiny, and which is often underrepresented in research outside the work of the Crosier Brothers. The objects in the Downing and Bakwin collections at the Lowell D. Holmes Museum of Anthropology are key to understanding every aspect of Asmat ritual and cultural life, and this information deserves to be more widely disseminated. By creating a consolidated source, it is my intention to spark interest both among researchers and the lay public. Recent forays by the Holmes Museum have allowed us to glean a more rounded picture of modern Asmat as a compliment to the Crosier’s work, and it will be of great benefit to share it with a wider audience than could be reached through internal publication by the University.
The Process

In early 2008, Holmes Museum Director, Jerry Martin, hired a student web designer to create the mechanics of the site. After several meetings between Jerry, myself and other Museum staff members, a consensus was reached regarding the layout we felt would be the most user friendly, as well as the types of information we thought important to include. We came up with a plan for the organization of the site, then met with our designer, and he started work.

While the design work progressed, we began making decisions regarding what photographs on file would be suitable, and which would need to be reshot. Advantageously, Barry and Paula Downing had generously purchased new audio-visual equipment for the Museum which was used on a short expedition undertaken back to Asmat in 2007, and the new camera produced much better pictures than we obtained using previous equipment. New photographs were taken of many pieces, and others were cleaned up using Adobe Photoshop©.

Next, I conducted research in our Museum library, online, and through correspondence with others who have been to Asmat and were familiar with their culture, and transcribed field notes from the 2007 expedition. When that was completed, I began drafting explanatory text for each section of the website. This continued throughout the project as time allowed.

Our web designer created templates for the information we planned to document on each piece, and I filled these in for the Downing, Bakwin and 2007 expedition collections. Information on the pieces included dimensions, physical description and materials used. When available, the maker(s) name, location collected and/or made, local
names for each item, and field notes including specific uses and family information were added as well.

We had also decided to add some audio-visual footage taken during the 2007 field trip, and one of the Museum graduate students, Troy Belford (who shot the film), began editing. This will not be included on the website at this time, however, since the amount of film proved to be too sizable to be prepared by the end of my portion of the project. It will be added upon completion, and will include footage of the entire process of creating some of the larger ritual objects, as well as some glimpses of daily life. This will prove invaluable as a second source of information, and we feel it will add an interesting dimension to the project.

This website fills a unique niche in the World Wide Web. Although there are several museums to date which have created public websites, none has fully taken advantage of current technology. Information on these websites is difficult to access, and the sites give little specific data on more than a few scattered pieces. The Holmes Museum website has rectified this by putting the entire collection of Asmat objects online, including nearly all the information on each piece that the staff has collected. In this way, all visitors to the site will have the same opportunity to receive the kind of in-depth education that only visiting researchers are generally able to attain. And education is, after all, the primary goal of most museums.

It is hoped that this project will serve as a model for all museums, and will be a boon to researchers of the Asmat all over the world. Our hope is that it will also encourage other museums to think seriously about how they can contribute more fully to worldwide education by taking advantage of modern technology to reach a more universal audience.
If a small, minimally funded university museum can accomplish this type of outreach, there is no valid reason why larger, more prestigious institutions cannot follow suit. As the world continues to shrink and technology takes larger and larger strides, we feel this type of web interaction should, and will, become the norm.
The Asmat use many symbols to decorate their carvings, and all of them are spiritually significant. Different regions use similar symbols, but their names and specific meanings might be slightly different between regions. Here is a list of some of the more common symbols, with their names and an explanation of the symbol from various regions:

A. COASTAL AND CENTRAL:
Bismam Region (Agats, Syuru, Per, Uwus); Becembub Region (Biwar Laut, Atsj, Yow, Amanamkai, Omadecep); Safan Region (Pirien, Ocenep, Basim, Buepis, Naneu, Bagair, Yaptambor, Bayun, Kayirin, Primapun, Aorket, Saman, Emene, Tareo 1, Waras, Semendoro); Simai Region; Kenekap Region (Kaimo)

- **bipane**—shell nosepiece
- **ainor**—mysterious design

- **bipane**—shell nosepiece
- **ainor**—mysterious design

- **ainor**—mysterious design
- **bipane**—shell nosepiece

- **asuk fofasi**—wigging worm
- **asesinokos**—wigging caterpillar
- **mbatsjem jak**—larva intestine

- **asuk fofasi**—wigging worm
- **mbatsjem jak**—larva intestine
kiki—scarification

ufirmbi—the head of a black king cockatoo

was—open clearing in the jungle

was—open clearing in the jungle; tail of a cuscus

tsjenepir—head of a pelican

fofoyir

yir—head of a hornbill

ir

utsj mbanef—lizard foot

wuti mbanef—lizard foot

tarep—flying fox foot

piru mbanef—rat foot

sok ef—foot of the ewewer wading bird
jär fapin—scarifications

bokoper—navel

bokoper—navel

upu—opening, hole

upo

senep—a fruit in the jungle

wenet—praying mantis

mbisak—testicles

usir tinau—gills of a rayfish

fatsjep—cuscus tail

sjumanmak—opening fern
mbistr—a tall tree

mbianam—star stone axe
mbiwanam

mbianam—stone axe
mbiunam

pe fe—crab’s foot

jifai—food bowl
tsji—canoe

tsjawir senin—tracks of a large larva

eu tsjen—crocodile vagina
amer kos—head of a snake

to—a fruit in the jungle
emak—bone

wepet fa—swallow’s tail

sanaer—a kind of spider;
a small animal that makes a noise
like a cricket

tifeser—the tracks of a small crab

piret sis—mouse or rat teeth
pir kos—moon

wusur—rayfish

apep—fish stomach

kara kiki—scarifications

satu mbai—feet of the satu bird

wutatamo—banyan tree roots
warat—wading bird; crab

pero mbafe—mouse foot

okain gambu—whirlpool

soka—shell nosepiece

soka—shell nosepiece

pi au—cassowary wattle

ofah kiki—scarifications
B. NORTHWESTERN:
Joerat Region (Yuan Yufri); Emari Ducur Region (Esmapan, Jakapis, Iroko, Pupis, Weo, Momogu); Unir Sirau Region (Sa, Er, Sawa-Erna, Bu Agani)

\[
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tar \\
tare—flying fox \\
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\[
\begin{array}{l}
tar \\
tare—flying fox \\
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\begin{array}{l}
piwur \\
puru—rayfish head \\
visi \\
usir
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{l}
mbu—turtle head \\
pi—cassowary head
\end{array}
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\[
\begin{array}{l}
mbipane—shell nosepiece
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{l}
soka—shell nosepiece
\end{array}
\]
*eu djim*—crocodile ribs

*pife*—cassowary ribs
*eu djim*—crocodile ribs

*mbwirak*—a small insect
*fri epmak*—tail of an oppossum

*fatsjep* and *tarep*—cuscus tail
ending in a flying fox foot

*asesinokos*—centipede

*anekos*—centipede

*pomar*—heron
fri pana—opossum

viri jak—fish intestines
fir ipma—opossum tail

okain gambu—whirlpool

worot—a wading bird

wenet—praying mantis

esatama—shoulder straps of carrying bag

esatama—shoulder straps of carrying bag

sok—sea bird
sok—sea bird
mbwinak—a small insect

perere—lightning

merparam—lightning

was—open clearing in the jungle;
cuscus tail

ama—a kind of fish

mbesin—a water snake

fofojir
jir—hornbill head

ufir—black king cockatoo head
**fatsjep**—cuscus tail

**afokak**—fish belly

**soka**—shell nosepiece

**utsjiu**—banyan tree roots

**usir tinau**—gills of a rayfish

**far**—butterfly

**worot omu**—wading bird

**woro**—frog

**worot omu**—wading bird

**woro**—frog
*ufu pek*—pig’s breast bone

*woro*—frog

*senene*—elbow

*amer*—snake

*woro*—frog

*boromo*—tree worms
asuk sofasi—wiggling worm

bokoper—navel

maka—pig bone

ofah kiki—scarifications

sa emes—woman’s carrying bag

mbanna tenem—eyehole

amfa—fish fins

ao—nipple

mbones—foam on the river
C. EASTERN: Unir Epmaik Region; Aramatak/Yomagau Region (we currently have no objects from this area)
D. NORTHEASTERN FOOTHILLS AND BRAZZA RIVER AREA:
   Bras Region (Sepana); Yupmakcain Region (several objects are from this region, from unspecified villages)

\textit{ake}—a fish; cheek

\textit{kamu}—sago pounder

\textit{erang}—sago pounder

\textit{sunana}—elbow

\textit{uma rake}—fish tail

\textit{usau}—fish stomach
mbirake—fish cheek
mbirisuman—a large fish

enam—a fish

uma usuman—stomach of an uma fish

okain gambu—whirlpool

serman zake—a snake’s intestine

amos tabi—water swirling down the sago trough

epmak mbi—swirling water

zima kom—turn in a river
Additional symbol:

Turtle Shell

taghat—tributary of a river

okain gambu—whirlpool

fira sisi—rat teeth
GLOSSARY

*aman* Bow. Used for hunting food and in warfare (sometimes *amun*)

*amin* Arrow (sometimes *ces*)

*an* Ceremonial sago grub (Capricorn beetle larvae) bowl fashioned from sago bark or carved of wood.

*anakat* Body of carving (i.e. *bis anakat*). Also used for stalk of bananas, etc.

*asenem* Woven plant fiber belt

*Asmat* Human being. The name of the people and area in southwestern New Guinea.

*atakam* Word; to speak; language. *Bis atakam* = the story of the *bis*

*bi anam* Star-shaped, worked stone used in headhunting. Since stone is uncommon in Asmat, it was once traditionally used as part of bride price

*bini* Vest. Can be either woven or beaded.

*bipane* Dual-spiraled nose ornament usually made of aquatic shell

*bis* 1) Tall, elaborately-carved pole representing relatives recently killed in battle or of natural causes
2) The spirit represented by the *bis* carvings
3) The feast surrounding the execution of the *bis* carving

*cassowary* Large, flightless bird similar to an emu. Used for food; feathers and claws used as decoration on many types of objects

*charcoal* Black pigment. Used as decorative paint for objects as well as bodies

*cicimen* Canoe prow. Asmat carve figures on the prows of each canoe, and when the vessel is no longer usable, the prow is removed and kept by its owner (other spelling variations based on dialect)

*cuscus* [from Indonesian language] Small marsupial similar to opossum, used for food, clothing, and decoration (sometimes *kuskus*)

*daker* Woven plant fiber skirt with many tassels. (sometimes *awer*) [see also *fagi*]

*ecawor* Special room prepared in the *Jeu* for the carving of the *bis* pole
Drum. Used in all Asmat ceremonies to accompany dancing and singing (sometimes *tifa*)

Wooden sago larvae container with carrying straps (sometimes *nokan*)

Woven plant fiber bag. Men use for carrying tools and tobacco. Women use for carrying gathered food items and sago (other spelling variations based on dialect)

Woven belt-like plant fiber skirt, often decorated with feathers (see also *daker*)

Sago pounder. Tool used to process sago pith for consumption.

Axe handle/shaft

Cuscus pelt hat

Wooden horn used in ceremonies, and previously in warfare (sometimes *fi*)

Wind. Fumeripitsj is the creator in the creation myth (with *ipitsj*, below)

Tobacco pipe (sometimes *yimis*)

Man; male. Fumeripitsj is the creator in the creation myth (with *fum*, above)

Men’s or bachelor’s house which serves as focal point of social structure and used as center of all planning, as well as feast house. Usually women are excluded except on specially determined occasions

Wooden container for carrying and drinking water

Fishing spear (sometimes *apan*)

Mourning bands. Woven arm and leg bands worn during the mourning period. (see also *ouf*)

Woven arm band with feather or sago tassels

White pigment of crushed mussel shell. Used in ritual and as paint

Hollow bone nose ornament

Tall carved figure representing an ancestor. Characteristic open space in center, and pointed canoe-shaped end
**ouf**  Mourning hat. Woven hat worn during the mourning period (see also *kaos*).

**pir**  Woven ritual mat of plant fibers. Decorated with combinations of black, red or white in geometric patterns or traditional symbols.

**pisau**  Bone knife (sometimes *pise* or *pisoa*).

**po**  Wooden paddle, often with woven decorated sheath (other spelling variations based on dialect).

**pokmbui**  Feast or celebration. *Bis pokmbui=bis* feast.

**pu (puyi)**  Spear. Used in hunting and battle. (other spelling variations based on dialect).

**red ochre**  Red pigment made of mud. Used as decorative paint.

**Safan**  World of the ancestors. Found to the west, across the sea.

**sago**  [from Indonesian language] A type of palm tree. The food (a starch residue) prepared by washing the pith; basic staple of the Asmat diet.

**si**  Stone axe head.

**sokumbat**  Decorative hair ornament of wood and feathers.

**tok**  Belt of woven plant fibers. Often decorated with pigments.

**tsjimen**  Phallus; the complex carved wing-like protrusion upward from the uppermost figure on the *bis* pole (sometimes *cemen*).

**tuni**  Large conch shell used for scooping water.

**waime**  Head-hunting necklace with bamboo pendant.

**was**  Pillow or headrest of carved wood. Formerly, many Asmat used skulls as headrests. (other spelling variations based on dialect).

**witap**  Crochet hook.

**wo ok se**  Necklace made of boar tusk, woven plant fibers and feathers.

**wowipits(j)**  Artist; Asmat wood carver.

**wukus**  Boar tusk bracelet.
**wuramon**  Open-bottomed canoe. Ancestors are carved within the canoe to take them to *Safan* (see above)

**yames**  Carved shield. [called *di* in the Becembub area] (other spelling variations based on dialect)

**yokomen**  Bamboo sago tongs. Used to remove balls of sago from cooking fire

**yufai**  Bowl used to hold painting pigments (other spelling variations based on dialect)
References


19. The Crosier Brothers website:  https://www.crosier.org