

The Asmat: Spirits, Shields, Symmetry

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1. Introduction

The Asmat, a people living in the alluvial, southwestern section of Papua, are known for their woodcarvings. This paper focuses on how the symbolism and symmetry on the shields corresponds with the Asmat's philosophy and concept of the cosmos, and the ideas presented in this research reflect and build upon previous studies. While this is not a direct application of French structuralism, principles from this subparadigm of cognitive anthropology will nevertheless be employed as the theoretical background in explaining the representations on and structure of the shields. French structuralists study cognition by focusing on binary oppositions and the methods by which reconciliation is achieved between these pairs. The most fundamental of oppositions is nature vs. culture, but secondary oppositions exist as well (1). Of importance to this paper is the secondary binary opposition of life vs. death, which often finds its resolution in religion. In A.J.J.M. Boeren's 1972 study of over 300 Asmat shields, he proposed that the interconnectedness and mirror images on the shields represented the cyclical nature of Asmat headhunting whereby the younger generation seeks revenge for the preceding generation's death (2). Combined with the concept of binary oppositions within French structuralism, this paper redevelops and takes Boeren's conclusions a step further and applies the methodology used in Anna Shepard's descriptions of the seven classes of symmetry as well as Evelyn Payne Hatcher's approach to studying art.

2. Discussion

The Asmat conceive of a universe divided into three parts: the living, the intermediate, and safan, the place in the west where the ancestors dwell (3). The intermediate is the realm of the dambir-ow, spirits of the recently deceased whose deaths must be avenged before they can enter safan (3). The division of the universe, though, is not a true division in the strictest sense of the word. Within the Asmat culture, there exists a fluidity between life and death, and the Asmat continually strive for harmony and balance between this relationship. However, death creates imbalances, and no death, except those of the elderly and the very young, is natural or accidental. Thus, magic, headhunting, and childbirth are viewed as main causes of death in Asmat society (4). Nevertheless, headhunting and magic also help restore balance as do other rituals such as the bi pokomban (mask feast).

The shields provide not only protection from spears and arrows in a raid and ward off malevolent spirits in the village, they also play an important part in maintaining balance. Each shield is commissioned by family members as part of the process for amending a loved one's death which enables that person to transcend from the living world to safan. In addition, the symbolic meaning of the three colors used on Asmat shields reinforces the shield's mediating role between the living and the dead. The color white reflects strength and the spirit world while the color red represents blood, parts of the body, or scarification, and the color black symbolizes the earthly world and the spirits on earth (5). According to Dirk Smidt (6), the primary purpose of the shields is to communicate the connection between the realms of the living and the dead. Furthermore, the shields are carved in the *jeu*, the intermediate place between the living and the ancestors (6). Gunter Konrad (7) urges westerners to look at the shields in their totality and to view the specific designs as "the Asmat expression of their relationship to nature, fellow beings, and the spirit world." While the abstract representations on the shields differ from region to region, they portray important subjects in Asmat culture, especially headhunting, and are meant to represent particular ancestors, and the design patterns on the shields from the various regions generally exhibit symmetry (8). Although symmetry may be a basic design characteristic and conducive for style comparisons, the degree and type of symmetry used as well as alterations to symmetrical design differ from culture to culture (9).

Shepard (9) outlined seven classes of design movement or symmetry: 1. translation (design simply repeats), 2. longitudinal reflection (mirror image reflected across a horizontal line), 3. transverse (mirror image across a vertical line), 4. bifold rotation (image turned 180°), 5. a combination of longitudinal and transverse reflection, 6. slide rotation (longitudinal plus translation), and 7. a combination of transverse reflection and bifold rotation. According to Shepard, the first step in analysis entails identifying the fundamental portion (the repeating part that comprises the design) and its particular type of repetitive movement (9). In addition, certain imperfections, such as elaborations on the fundamental portion which creates symmetrical variability, reflect a secondary concern for symbolism (9). The sample of shields incorporated into this analysis is from the

Lowell D. Holmes Museum of Anthropology at Wichita State University. Using a listing of the shields' accession numbers and the villages from which the shields originated, approximately one half of the shields from each village were randomly selected and included within this study.

In the thirty-two shields studied, the most common occurrence of symmetry in main design was class 5, the transverse and longitudinal reflection with bifold rotation and slide reflection. Moreover, the coastal/central region displayed a higher degree of symmetry than the northwestern region's sampling. When class 5 was not present in the main design, class 7, transverse reflection and bifold rotation with slide reflection, or the finite form of class 5 was often observed instead. Even a few of the accents contained a finite form of class 5 or 7. Since all five types of motions are present within class 5, Shepard (9) classifies class 5 as having the highest symmetry and class 7, which has three forms of symmetry, ranks second. Therefore, the overall design factors employed in Asmat shields utilize the highest forms of symmetry on a consistent basis. Consequently, considering that the shields serve as a medium between the living and the dead, a tangible vehicle of an intangible, the symmetry on the shields represent the balance and fluidity desired between the living and the dead.

3. Conclusion

The Asmat's desire for harmony can be seen in everyday life and religion, and other cultures possess this same ultimate goal as well (10). Yet, the particular understanding and approach for achieving this end and its material expression does differ between cultures. In the study of the combination of forms, what is important is how harmony is achieved through the arrangements (11). For the Asmat, the common use of high forms of symmetry in shield design illustrates the desired quality of relationships with the spirits, and the carved shield, a mediator between the living and the spirits, serves as the form. The symbols depicted on the shields represent those items important in Asmat belief and everyday life, and their arrangement and association with headhunting serves as a means to the desired end of a harmonious balance between the living and the dead. Indeed, Evelyn Payne Hatcher (12) writes that "behind the symbol lies the model (the definition, the paradigm of the way the world, reality is), and therefore how society is conceived."

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5. References

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