

Authentic Primitive Art and Indigenous Global Desires between Reality and Hyperreality

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Introduction

Some twenty years ago, Shelly Errington discussed the “double death of authentic primitive art” in her influential work *The Death of Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress*.¹ Emerging in the first half of the twentieth century in the West, the category of authentic primitive art has comprised all those “exotic” objects with “authentic” ritual or practical functions in their source communities. After a golden epoch, which, to Errington, and other authors,² spanned from the 1957 opening of the New York’s Museum of Primitive Art to MoMA’s 1984 exhibit “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art,” authentic primitive art began to die out. As Errington argues, this was mainly caused by the anti-evolutionary and ethical turn of disciplines such as history and anthropology, along with the “vanishing” of non-literate societies and their “authentic” material cultures (which provoked its “double” death).

More recently, Errington has observed that artefacts made by Third- and Fourth-World art makers have continued to be seen as bearing attributes of authentic primitivism, even though they are chiefly targeted at the global (art) market and hence are “inauthentic.”³ Moreover, a further point she raises is that the concept of art has become loose. Thus, differences between low and high art, but also authentic and inauthentic or primitive and non-primitive (if it can be put so) are more and more blurred. That being so, Errington eventually contends that the terms “authentic” and “primitive” have “lost credibility, at least when linked to the term ‘Art’.”⁴

1 Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

2 Cf. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (University of Chicago Press, 2001 [1989]).

3 Shelly Errington, “Globalizing Art History,” in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007); Shelly Errington, “Entangled Subjects and Art Objects,” in *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Anthropology*, ed. Simon Coleman, Susan B. Hyatt, and Ann Kingsolver (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

4 Errington, “Entangled Subjects and Art Objects,” 360.

While I am persuaded of the general validity and genuineness of Errington's analysis, her final deduction seems to be controversial. Indeed, within what Errington defines as "Art Zone"⁵—that is, the zone of interaction between art makers, patrons, buyers, and other (f)actors—notions of "authentic" and "primitive" seem to maintain a crucial role: for instance, primitivism in art—although often disguised behind milder and politically-correct labels such as "ethnic art"—still animates the production and sale of artefacts and plays a role in differentiating "others" from "us." In addition, it continues to relate extant source communities with their "primitive" ancestors. Similarly, "authenticity" is still the determinant of profit-making in ethnic art sale transactions and processes of cultural restoration and reinvention. Thus, more than losing credibility in connection with art in their multiple acceptations and mutual entanglements, the notions of "authentic" and "primitive" seem to retain their topicality within the relational and hierarchical space of the Art Zone. As such, the point at stake here is to understand how these notions evolve and are employed by the different agents in the Art Zone.

To explore these permutations and different modalities, in this paper I discuss the case of one of the most iconic art traditions belonging to the category of authentic primitive art, the Asmat of West Papua. Framed as "art" (*kunst*) by Dutch missionaries and colonial administrators in the late 1950s, the reception of Asmat material culture culminated overseas in the exhibition of Michael Rockefeller's Asmat collection in the Museum of Primitive Art and, in Asmat, in the opening of the local Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress, on August 17, 1973, and the subsequent launch of the Asmat Cultural Festival in 1981. So around the time of the death of primitive art, Asmat art's fame reached its zenith and began to gain centrality in the Indonesian nationalistic cultural plan, mainly through the establishment of the Asmat Museum in the visionary theme park of Taman Mini "Indonesia Indah" in 1986.⁶

My enquiry will, therefore, attempt to qualify notions of "authentic" and "primitive" by investigating Asmat art today both in the reality of Asmat land, and the above-mentioned hyperspace of Jakarta's Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (henceforth Taman Mini). This will allow me to reflect on the value of authentic primitive art to Asmat art makers. At the same time,

5 Errington, "Entangled Subjects and Art Objects," 378.

6 Taman Mini is the Indonesian edutainment park that was built by then-President Suharto and his wife Siti Hartinah to visualise their highly political and cultural project of the Indonesian nation through the juxtaposition of the main customary traits of a selection of ethnicities of the Archipelago.

it will shed light on their “glocal”⁷ proclivity—or, as per Pierre Bourdieu, *habitus*⁸—in innovating and cultivating global aspirations while acting locally, adhering to local customary norms, and perpetuating ancestral ways of making art. As I will demonstrate, this *habitus* also becomes a form of resistance to typical neo-liberal forces of the current global art market that undermine the continuity of Asmat art.⁹ The analysis is introduced by a brief sketch of the historical process of art formation—or “artification”¹⁰—of Asmat material culture that precedes the ethnographic explorations.

The artification of Asmat material culture

The material culture of Southern West New Guinea has been known since the first explorations of the Southern Seas.¹¹ It was significantly popularised through the post-Second World War period when its design “caused a sensation in art collecting circles and led to the extensive collecting expeditions carried out by Michael C. Rockefeller and others.”¹² Western artists, such as the Swiss avant-garde painter and sculptor Serge Brignoni (also the founder of the ethnographic museum of Lugano) or, allegedly, Henri Matisse, were particularly inspired by the Oceanic style and in particular that of Sepik and Asmat. This specific bond with Western art, which was labelled as “affinities”

7 Here I employ the term “glocal” to indicate the particular attitude that, according to George Ritzer, stresses the centrality of the local, relations, and authenticity, and that, within the global world, aspires at “something.” In contrast, the “grobial”—which is a portmanteau word combining “growth” and “global”—alludes to global growing imperialistic and neo-liberal tendencies of massification, standardisation, and hyperrealisation, which aim for devaluation, delocalisation, stigmatisation, falsification, and ultimately “nothing.” See George Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing 2* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007), 36–38.

8 For example, in Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78–87.

9 See note 7.

10 See Roberta Shapiro, “Artification as Process,” *Cultural Sociology* 13, no. 3 (September 2019): 265–275.

11 The first recorded explorations are those of Captain Cook in 1770, Kolff in 1826, and Salomon Müller (the “Triton”) in 1828. With the turn of the century, we can remember the expeditions of Jan Gooszen in 1907–1913, and Paul Wirz in 1922. See Fons Bloemen, *Initial Encounters between Europeans and Papuas of South New Guinea from the 17th until the Early 20th Century* (Jabeek: Fons Bloemen, 1998), 27–28, 30–32, 147–148, 169–174; René Wassing, “History: Colony, Mission and Nation,” in *Asmat Art: Woodcarvings of Southwest New Guinea*, ed. Dirk Smidt (New York: George Braziller, 1993), 27–28; Adriaan Lamme and Dirk A. M. Smidt, “Collection: Military-Explorers and Anthropologists,” in *Asmat Art*, ed. Smidt, 137–146; Alphonse Sowada, “Perspectives of Art in the Context of Asmat,” in *Asmat: Perception of Life in Art: The Collection of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress*, ed. Ursula Konrad, Alphonse Sowada, and Gunter Konrad (Mönchengladbach: B. Kühlen Verlag, 2002), 48–49.

12 Dirk A. M. Smidt, “Introduction,” in *Asmat Art*, ed. Smidt, xiii.

in the MoMA's 1984 exhibit "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art,"¹³ was one of the main and probably best-known reasons for the categorisation of Asmat carvings as high authentic primitive art.¹⁴ Interestingly, the attribute "high," as Errington also specifies by quoting Arthur Danto,¹⁵ refers not to the link with Western fine arts but to the vernacular ritual function of the object. As such, the paradigm of authentic primitive art is intimately linked to the sacred "aura" of the work of art and its role in accessing higher realities, without which it loses its *raison d'être*.

With the establishment of Dutch colonial administration and the Catholic mission in the early 1950s, Asmat became increasingly familiar with metal tools, such as iron nails rudimentarily mounted on wooden handles (Asmat *seipiri*) and, later, proper chisels, gouges, and files.¹⁶ These new woodcarving tools altered woodcarvers' techniques at a rapid pace, enabling the usage of harder woods (as the ironwood, Asmat *pes*) that, until then, were not commonly employed because of the frailness of the available source material for tool making (human and animal bones, snail shells, wild boar canines, petrified wood). Furthermore, Dutch missionaries (in particular the members of the congregation of the Sacred Heart, Huub von Peij and Willem van Dongen) aided woodcarvers in imagining and shaping new artistic models like the two-dimensional openwork board called *ajour* or the storyboard.¹⁷ This development had the double objective of attuning Asmat production to aesthetic and formal canons of Western art, such as durability, portability, and accuracy, and guiding Asmat expressivity towards a more naturalistic and self-evident

13 See William Stanley Rubin, "Primitivism" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, vol. 1 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994).

14 See Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress*, 89–100.

15 Arthur C. Danto, "Artifact and Art," in *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropological Collections*, ed. Susan Vogel (New York: Centre for African Art and Preston Verlag, 1988), 18–32.

16 Although these were the main tools, since the early twentieth century, the Asmat have also used rough metal pieces retrieved from the remains of shipwrecks, called *kas ndes* by Atsj people—on this see Tobias Schneebaum, *Secret Places: My Life in New York and New Guinea* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000)—or bartered with Chinese crocodile hunters, who were probably among the very first to have come into contact with Asmat people.

17 Ursula Konrad and Alphonse Sowada, "The Collection of the Museum of Agats," in *Asmat: Perception of Life in Art*, 127; Tobias Schneebaum, "Change in Asmat Art," in *People of the River, People of the Tree: Change and Continuity in Sepik and Asmat Art*, ed. Minnesota Museum of Art, Crosier Asmat Museum, and Landmark Center Galleries (St. Paul: Minnesota Museum of Art, 1989), 55.

style.¹⁸ In addition, it reinforced the individualisation of art production.¹⁹ Remarkably, the missionary-induced conversion of Asmat abstract-symbolic vernacular style to a representational language occurred in the very same years as when the abstract expressionistic movement was thriving in the West.

Despite this process of transformation that has been altering Asmat expressivity internally, the production of ritual and traditional objects—the authentic primitive art—continued. These, in fact, were produced according to the vernacular standards and sold to collectors and tourists after ceremonies instead of being left to decay in the jungle. However, external causes brought this production to a (temporary) halt.

Starting from the mid-1950s, the activity of lumber companies, such as the Dutch IMEX, diverted Asmat people from their own woodcarving practices.²⁰ On May 12, 1964, the Indonesian government—which in the meantime had taken control of the Papuan region from the Dutch colonial possessions—began to ban Asmat traditional rituals and objects because of their link with headhunting and cannibalism.²¹ The production continued underground, and from the late 1960s, the intervention of the local Catholic diocese, in conjunction with the UN, persuaded the state to ease their policy on the grounds that carvings are basically the only source of income for most communities. The Development and Marketing of Asmat Handicrafts project (1968–1974), financed through the Fund of the United Nations for the Development of West Irian (FUNDWI) and the Indonesian provincial industrial development programme (*Perindustrian*), brought a further push to the process of art formation in Asmat, raising awareness of concepts such as “economic and monetary value” and “aesthetical quality” while opening new trade channels for artefact sales overseas and within Indonesia.²²

18 Dirk A. M. Smidt, “Innovation in Asmat Art and its Presentation in Museums,” in *Asmat: Perception of Life in Art*, 442.

19 A seminal work on Asmat artists is Adrian Gerbrands, *Wow-Ipits: Eight Asmat Woodcarvers of New Guinea* (The Hague: Mouton & Co. Publishers, 1967), in which he portrays works and personalities of eight of the most renowned woodcarvers of the village of Amanamkai.

20 Tobias Schneebaum, “Touring Asmat,” *Pacific Arts* 7 (1993): 52.

21 For a detailed account, see Alphonse Sowada, “Asmat Art in Transition,” in *Time and Tide: The Changing Art of the Asmat of New Guinea: From the Collection of the American Museum of Asmat Art at the University of St. Thomas*, ed. Molly Hennen Huber, et al. (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2009), 19–25.

22 Jac. Hoogerbrugge, “Development and Marketing of Asmat Handicrafts FUNDWI 18. Project Findings and Recommendations: Report Prepared for the Government of Indonesia by the International Labour Organisation Acting as Executing Agency for the United Nations Development Programme” (Geneva: United Nations Development Programme – International Labour Organisation, 1975).

Three subsequent events are worth noting in the process of art formation. On Indonesia's Independence Day, August 17, 1973, the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress in Agats, the capital city of the region, was opened. Its main goal was to preserve the local cultural heritage, raise awareness on Asmat identity and enhance Asmat artistic genius. In line with the concept of indigenous museums, local people, such as former curator and then Asmat governor Yuvensius Biakai, were selected and trained in universities and museums in Indonesia and overseas to operate the museum. Also linked to this was the ensuing inauguration of the yearly festival and art woodcarving competition in 1981,²³ which was established to maintain quality standards and provide visibility for the woodcarvers. It was indeed essential for woodcarvers to adhere to (Western) aesthetic canons for their artefacts to be selected, win the competition and the prize money, and be sold.²⁴ Lastly, in 1986, the first museum entirely dedicated to the Asmat was officially opened in Jakarta at the Taman Mini miniature park, after the then-First Lady, Ibu Tien Suharto, evaluated Asmat art to be consistent with the values of the Indonesian state philosophy (*Pancasila*).²⁵ Asmat artistic production entered the elite of the most representative culture of the archipelago, and the Suhartos' Our Hope Foundation (Yayasan Harapan Kita) sponsored promotional tours of Asmat woodcarvers (and dancing groups) overseas²⁶ as well as commissioning a number of works throughout the archipelago.²⁷

The artification of Asmat material culture has therefore rapidly brought Asmat culture to be renowned worldwide and traditional artefacts to be very much sought after by art collectors and members of the general populace

23 The "Lomba ukir" or "Pesta budaya" is the yearly festival that takes place in Agats, the capital of the region, and consists of cultural and artefact exhibitions and an auction of contemporary artworks selected on a competitive basis. See Nick Stanley, *The Making of Asmat Art: Indigenous Art in a World Perspective* (Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2012), 143–170.

24 As Nick Stanley puts it, the "decision about whether a work was of an adequate standard was now exercised by an outside purchaser with his own aesthetic values that carvers had to recognise if they wanted their work to sell." Stanley, *The Making of Asmat Art*, 110.

25 *Filsafah Negara Pancasila* (National Philosophy of Pancasila) is the 1945 ideological programme for the Indonesian nation which is articulated in five principles: belief in the Almighty God; a just and civilised humanity; a unified Indonesia; democracy led by the wisdom in a consensus of representatives; social justice for all Indonesians.

26 In 1987, Asmat woodcarvers, musicians, and dancers participated in several festivals throughout Europe thanks to the support of the Yayasan Harapan Kita. The same happened for events in the US in 1991. See Jac. Hoogerbrugge, "Art Today: Woodcarving in Transition," in *Asmat Art*, ed. Smidt, 149–153.

27 According to my woodcarver informants, around those years they received a number of commissions for works from Jakarta.

looking for a sound investment.²⁸ However, starting from the mid-1990s, a decrease in tourism and art trade slowed down the positive trend of recent decades and initiated a period of a general decline in Asmat art in which the ideas of “authenticity” and “primitive,” and consequently “art,” have started to be challenged.

Asmat art in the reality of Asmat land

Already in my first few days in the Asmat region,²⁹ it became immediately clear to me that the area was far more isolated than I had expected. Access to the region is difficult because of the volatile political situation in the province of Papua and the limited transportation services.³⁰ In addition, missionaries and aid workers, who until the late 1980s were mostly Westerners and acted as brokers between Asmat and outsiders and facilitated international tourism, are almost all Indonesian these days.³¹ Sales of artefacts are experiencing a lull amidst a general economic decline in the region. The local government-owned art shop that once traded contemporary Asmat artefacts is hardly doing any business,³² and for those who are looking for fine art pieces or souvenirs in the city, there are only a few art galleries owned by non-Asmat that offer old high qualities pieces—and a few contemporary artefacts—at very high prices.³³

During my conversations with the Asmat woodcarvers in several villages of central Asmat (Atsj, Amanamkai, Ambisu, and Yow), I noticed a constant and rather grave concern about this declining situation. In fact, these conditions are discouraging Asmat youths from taking up a career in woodcarving and this will lead to cultural obliteration. To avoid this, woodcarvers, often

28 In this regard, it is interesting to mention that, in the column “Where to put your money” in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in the early 1990s, Asmat art is indicated as “an opportunity to build a reasonable collection in a particular artistic genre before prices have gone sky-high.” Jonathan Friedland, “Asmat Art: Carving Out a Niche,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 28, 1991, 42.

29 The study was conducted between 2016 and 2018.

30 A few small aircraft connect Asmat and its Ewer airstrip with the cities of Timika and Merauke. Due to multiple factors, flights can be delayed or cancelled at any time. The ferry can be an alternative mode of transportation, although it runs only a few times a month, and the duration and the conditions of the trip can be rather tough.

31 They mostly come from the Indonesian provinces of Sumatra, Kei, Flores, Java, and Timor. Up to now, Father Vince Cole, from the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, is the only international Catholic missionary working in the area.

32 Very few people in Agats know about the shop, which lies out of the city’s busiest area and is not well advertised.

33 Prices are expressed in US dollars and, in most cases, amount to thousands of dollars. Artefacts are purchased from local woodcarvers for a very modest price.

with the support of the local Catholic mission, are trying to adapt their production of artefacts to the formats and the aesthetic taste dictated by the market (which is mainly domestic, i.e., Indonesian). They are therefore more and more engaged with applied art, which comprises architectural elements embellished with Asmat inlay work and Asmatised furnishings (lamps, church supplies, and pieces of furniture). Moreover, they are increasingly trying to attune their craftsmanship to the standard of accurateness (*kehalusan*) that in Indonesia is set by the more “civilised” handicrafts of the Balinese and Javanese traditions. Yet, if on the one hand, these concerns are pushing Asmat woodcarvers to reorient and commodify their art, on the other hand, they are implicitly confident that their traditional art will never vanish or succumb to any crisis. After all, the woodcarvers I have been working with believe that adhering to their customary prescriptions is the way to please the ancestors and God and, consequently, preserve their artistic traditions. Put differently, the practice of their “authentic primitive art” will secure its perpetuity and, in turn, the survival of their culture.

In my enquiry into the evolutions of the concepts of authenticity and primitiveness in Asmat art, woodcarvers have usually referred to it in terms of “uniqueness.” As explained to me by Yohanis Tuanban (fifty-five years old), the leader of the woodcarving workshop in the village of Atsj, and confirmed by other woodcarvers, uniqueness entails several levels of understanding. The object is unique, which is a *unicum* not to be replicated (“every woodcarving is unique”).³⁴ The source of inspiration is also unique (“whatever the tale or the image, everything is stored in our mind”)³⁵ and the stylistic motives of the work of art that are typical of a specific woodcarver, family, or community (“every woodcarver has got his own motif”).³⁶

Uniqueness also implies improvisation and spirituality. Every object is unique (and authentic) not just because it is not duplicated, but also because there is not any preparatory sketch, unlike, for instance, Balinese handicraft. This lack of a script is what connects uniqueness with the transcendental component, that is, a further hallmark of Asmat material culture and art. As Tuanban remarks, “sinking the chisel properly into the wood involves the aid of God and ancestors,”³⁷ who therefore become co-makers of the objects. Indeed, ancestors usually interact with makers

34 “Setiap ukiran itu unik.”

35 “Ceritera apa, gambar apa, ada tersimpan dalam otaknya.”

36 “Setiap cescuwipitsj punya motif sendiri.”

37 “Ketika kami tanam, mereka mendukung—Tuhan, Nenek Moyang, leluhur—mereka mendorong.”

through dreams or visitations.³⁸ However, it is the woodcarver who needs to invoke the ancestors, and for that he has to behave ethically and customarily, practice religion (both traditional and Christian), and know specific techniques (e.g., sleeping techniques). Once the association has been established, ancestral and supernatural assistance runs throughout the whole making process, up until the sale of the artefact. The spiritual power that intervenes, which in Indonesian is generically termed *roh* (Asmat *ceser*), gives the object an aura that people see as contributing to its ceremonial and economic success. This aura is perceivable by woodcarvers and therefore hardly falsifiable.³⁹



Fig. 1: Master woodcarver Tuanban at work in the workshop of the village of Atsj.

A further hallmark in reference to Asmat authentic art is the material used. Only specific kinds of woods found in Asmat forests can be used to make Asmat art. *Pes* (ironwood), *pit* (weeping paperbark), *tow* (a nutmeg species), and *ci* (tropical almond) are among those more frequently used materials. Every object is carved from a specific wood because of

³⁸ This particular aspect will be tackled in my PhD thesis. See also Astrid de Hontheim, "Imagination Behind Shape: The Invisible Content of Asmat Artefacts," *Anthropological Forum* 20, no. 3 (2010): 240.

³⁹ Instances of forgery are usually perpetrated by Balinese or Javanese woodcarvers. Several of the woodcarvers with whom I have talked believe that apart from formal discrepancies, the most critical differentiation lies in the absence in the copies of Asmat *roh* (spirit).

distinct inherent properties and on customary grounds. As confirmed by Tuanban, the utilisation of other kinds of wood is not conceivable—“It is not allowed!”⁴⁰ Wood is, indeed, part of the process of making Asmat art and responds to the solicitations of the maker who has to interpret the log correctly and know the qualities of the wood to chisel with ease (“We look at the log thoroughly, and we understand what can be done with it”).⁴¹ There are traditional norms that prevent makers from using different kinds of wood than those customarily allowed for the specific item.⁴² Moreover, certain species of trees (e.g., mangrove) are generally not employable for woodcarving because of their high level of sacredness. However, several woodcarvers would be happy to work with other types of wood for purposes that are different from the ceremonial ones, as Tuanban explains:

For instance, to make a *mbis* pole [ancestor pole] we have to use *tow* tree [a local kind of nutmeg]. If there is a customary feast, we must use *tow*. Then, we want to carve something for a museum. We can do this by using ironwood; but if the object is for a customary ceremony, it can be *tow* only. A further example: let’s suppose we want to make an *em* [drum]—you have to use *pes*, *gambir*, or *jowob* [see footnote 36]. It can’t be made of any other kind of wood, because it is against *adat* [customary law]. Nenek Moyang won’t agree; we could experience serious repercussions [lit. “we may become victims”].⁴³

[Should we carve] in Europe, we can do differently [with different wood]. Asmat power enters the matter anyway. There is already a design from our will. When there is that, we put it into practice, and the chisels move accordingly; that is Asmat. In 2007 we brought wooden material to build the *jeuw* [Asmat traditional house and socio-cultural centre] from here

40 “Tidak bisa!”

41 “Kami lihat kayu begitu, begitu dan memahami apa yang bisa diciptakan.”

42 For instance, the *em*, the traditional Asmat drum, can be made from three different species of tree: *jowob* (*peltophorum pterocarpum*), *kawir* (*uncaria gambir*), or *sakar* (*nauclea orientalis*); the *mbi* or ancestor pole can only be made from two kinds: *tow* (a local species of *myristica fragrans*) and *fesak* (*canarium ovatum*).

43 “Kalau contoh mau bikin mbis, harus pake kayu tow. Kalau pesta harus pake kayu tow. Terus, mau buat macam apa untuk museum, ini bisa kayu besi, tapi kalau untuk pesta punya, untuk atraksi pesta, tidak bisa kayu lain. Contoh lain, buat em. Harus pake kayu pes, gambir atau jowob, tetapi tidak, tidak bisa bahan lain, karena lawan adat, ya Nenek Moyang tidak setuju, paling kita korban.”

to Jakarta by plane. If woodcarving material is not available there, we can just carry it inside our suitcase!⁴⁴

What Tuanban suggests is that even if the wood that is used is different, the resulting artefact will still be Asmat, for it is the maker who authenticates the object and not (merely) the matter. Asmat power, which mainly originates in the connection between the maker and the spiritual forces (ancestors), is always transmitted to the object.⁴⁵ So, if Asmat ritual objects cannot be made of woods other than those customarily prescribed for their rituals, woodcarvings “for a museum” (which stands for the global art market) can be done with different kinds of woods. In this latter case, Asmat woodcarvers are nonetheless required to comply with their customary rules:

Outside ceremonies, we can directly fell trees, but we have to talk to the tree first [that is, with the spirits dwelling inside]. They deserve this kind of respect. We do also have to make an offering and pray. We must make an offering. If you can't make an offering, what is important is that we [respectfully] worship it. All ethnic groups have a culture. The *Moyang* [ancestors] get happy like that. What is important is that we utter different words that we intone. When we sing, they [*Moyang*] are glad. No doubt that this is the way to act, we can worship, this is the way.⁴⁶

Tuanban highlights that customary rules also apply in different contexts. Indeed, Asmat ethical behaviour is what should guide them in relation to other cultures. The “authentic” and “primitive”—in its etymological sense—way of making art is therefore still of the utmost importance. Would this also apply to the hyperspace of Taman Mini where the Asmat art is more exposed to forces of the global art market?

44 “Kalau di Eropa bisa beda. Gaya Asmat langsung masuk di bahan. Sudah ada gambaran dari ingatan. Yang ada itu, sudah langsung dituangkan, dan pahat jalan begitu, tetap Asmat. Tahun 2007 kami bawa bahan jew dari sini ke Jakarta dengan pesawat angkatan udara. Bahan ukir, kalau di sana kekurangan, bisa bawa di dalam koper saja!”

45 This is, for example, the case of *etsjopok*, particular valuable objects (such as soulships, weapons, various sculptures, etc.) that are connected to life-cycle rituals (*pokmbu*), and are used to remember and “avenge” the ancestors. For instance, see Gerard Zegwaard, “Headhunting Practices of the Asmat of Netherlands New Guinea,” *American Anthropologist* 61, no. 6 (December 1959): 1029; Pauline Van der Zee, *Etsjopok, Avenging the Ancestors: The Bisj Poles of the Asmat and a Proposal for a Morphological Method* (Ghent: University of Ghent, Department of Ethnic Art, 1996), 25.

46 “Di luar pesta bisa tebang saja, tetapi harus bicara sama kayu. Mereka punya kehormatan itu begini. Harus derma juga, berdoa. Harus derma. Kalau tidak bisa derma, yang penting kami harus percaya, Semua suku punya budaya. Moyang senang begitu, yang penting kita mengucapkan suatu kata-kata yang kita melagu. Kalau menyanyi mereka senang, pasti begitu sesuai dengan keyakinan, bisa percaya, begitu.”



Fig. 2: Asmat woodcarvers and trees.

Asmat art in the hyperreality of Taman Mini

My visit to Taman Mini “Indonesia Indah” coincides with my very first trip to Indonesia in 2012, and is part of an organised tour aimed at familiarising foreigners with Indonesia’s cultural and ethnic variety. During the visits to the park’s exhibitions, museums, and the various pavilions displaying different Indonesian provinces, I am struck by the stark contrast between the general cheerful atmosphere of the park and the bad mood of a man who is carving a sculpture in a shack selling souvenirs in the Papua Pavilion. Indeed, he appears somewhat irritated and annoyed by the presence of visitors. As I am later able to reconstruct through photos and pieces of memory, that man is there not only to make art for selling but also to embody a living witness of a distinct and singular set of cultural traditions.

Coming back after several years, in 2016, I go to look for him, but the lady in the pavilion’s souvenir shop (the same shack in which the woodcarver was chiselling) tells me that the man has passed away recently. His name was Deki Asiam (and was known simply as Deki) and he was an Asmat man coming from the village of Amaru, in the outback of the Casuarina Coast (the southern coast of Asmat). He had apparently left the Asmat region in the 1990s and gone to work as a woodcarver in Surabaya and Bandung, and later moved to Jakarta, where he married a Javanese woman. He was in his mid-eighties when I saw him, even though I thought he was much younger, perhaps also because of the psychedelic make-up of his body decorations (much more flamboyant than those of the Asmat, which are naturally extracted). He died after a trip to Bali, where he went to get boards, planks, and various materials for his woodcarving activity. The spot where he used to carve is nearly unaltered, with chisels, wooden blocks, and shaving chips scattered all over, and a cardboard sign asking tourists for a donation if photographed. Everything seems to be in place. A portrait of Deki in a coloured pastel pencil hangs on the wall amid a collection of Asmat and Papuan woodcarvings. Now his grandson, Benyamin Birif (twenty-eight years old)—known as Benny—has taken up the baton and takes care of the woodcarvings made and left by his grandfather. He is employed at the Papua Pavilion and plays the Asmat-living-witness role as his grandfather did. He belongs to the generation of Asmat millennials, those who have started to attend university. He also married a Javanese woman. As he explains to me, he is keen on carving—although he admits being not as good as the grandfather yet—as well as conversing with and performing for the pavilion’s guests:

My work is done [at the pavilion]. I undress; I put [traditional] make-up on all my body, on my face [he mimes the gestures of wearing makeup], done! I start chiselling and singing an

[Asmat traditional] song: “Wo—Wo—Wo—Yooooooo, ooo...”
I keep singing. “Yoong yong yoong...” [imitation of Chinese
language]—Chinese tourists come straightaway. That’s it.⁴⁷

Looking around the shop, what catches my attention are the various woodcarvings showcased: several old objects and a number of sculptures 40 cm to 90 cm in height, rather sloppily displayed, and expressing Asmat and Kamoro styles and at times a combination of both. Most of these objects were carved by Deki, who used to make a living by selling them to the (non-Asmat) shop owner. Benny says these are all *kenang-kenangan* (remembrances, mementoes), probably also from Deki’s life in Asmat where, according to my Asmat woodcarver informants in Asmat, he was a talented carver or *cescuwipitsj*.⁴⁸ The combination of styles is the testimony to the experimental and adaptive style of Deki, reflecting the philosophy of the park, wherein the juxtaposition of diverse cultures is aimed to render a homogenous identity modeled upon administrative provinces (thirty-four to date). I am struck by the fact that many of the objects are not properly finished. I think this is probably because of the age of the man, but Benny clarifies that in Taman Mini neither buyers nor the shop owner pay attention to the artefacts’ neatness:

Some time ago I made a small sculpture, but I hadn’t finished it yet. I had just refined the head. But the shop’s owner sold it to a Korean. I said: “It is not finished yet!” “Ah, don’t worry,” she replies, “it’s authentic!” She takes it, sells it, and I get some money. I mean, it wasn’t finished yet! It was still rough! She took the original piece, which was still coarse, and wrapped it because she already knew [that it could be sold]. That’s the story, that’s how it is.⁴⁹

47 “Dang-dang, terus habis, kerja selesai. Buka pakaian; cat semua, muka... udah! Memahat; sambil nyanyi: ‘Wo Wo Wo Yooooo ooo...’ nyanyi. ‘Yung yong yung...’ Datang langsung orang Cina. Begitu.”

48 *Cescuwipitsj* identifies particularly talented woodcarvers, and also masters in other domains than art (hunting, performing rituals, etc.). This term differs from *wowipitsj*, which is the common term to refer to a person who can carve.

49 “Kemarin saya bikin patung kecil, tapi saya belum bikin semua. Cuma bikin kepala doang. Cuma dia beli sama orang Korea. Saya bilang ‘Belum bikin semua!’ ‘Ah, bukan, itu karena asli’ kata dia. Dia ambil, dia beli pada dia, saya jual. Karena dia sudah tahu, kan? Ah ah! Oh, berarti ini nggak terlalu halus! Dia ambil orisinil, masa kayak belum rapi, bongkar, karena dia udah tahu. Sejarahnya begitu, kayaknya begitu.”



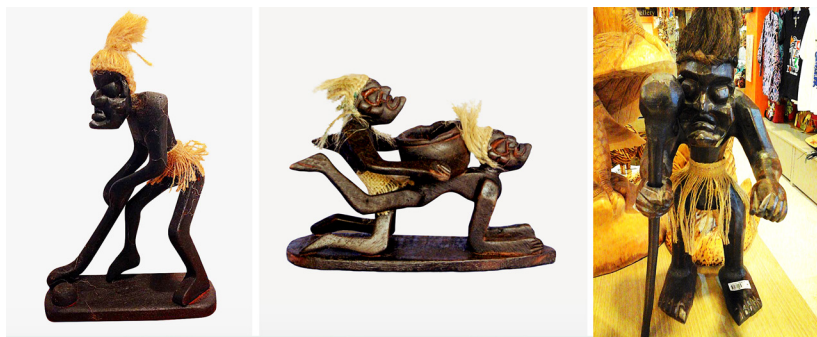
Fig. 3: The souvenir shop at Taman Mini's Papuan Pavilion. In the middle, the spot where woodcarver Deki used to carve for tourists.



Fig. 4: Artefacts in Kamoro-Asmat style allegedly carved by Deki.

Just opposite to these artefacts, tourist merchandise is stockpiled at the counter: key rings with miniaturised Asmat drums, ethnic bracelets and necklaces, printed batik shirts with bird of paradise motifs, and small wooden statues caricaturing Asmat people in various ways: playing hockey, holding an ashtray on their backs, or having bestial sexual intercourse. These products are displayed as if they were the hot deals of the shop, right at the front of the counter. The same caricaturing statues can also be easily found at souvenir shops elsewhere in Indonesia (e.g., at Jakarta’s Soekarno Hatta International Airport and Makassar’s Sultan Hasanuddin International Airport, or in shopping malls), as well as on the Web,⁵⁰ where they can be sold as “modern Asmat art.”⁵¹ In the Papua Pavilion’s display, elements highlighting “savagery,” “nature,” and “wild instinct” are quite recurrent, demonstrating that the park’s underlying credo is to portray a static and hierarchical view of the nation, wherein the narrative of the timeless and grotesque primitivism of peripheral provinces has remained over the years well-nigh unaltered. When I ask what Benny thinks about these souvenirs, he replies, “These are not of good quality because they are copies [*tempel-tempel*]. The wood is not authentic. This way of making is not original [*tidak asli*].”⁵²

Not too far from the Papua Pavilion, the park offers a place entirely dedicated to Asmat art: the Asmat Museum. This museum is located at the opposite side of the Papua Pavilion, immersed in the Flower Park



Figs. 5–7: Grotesque and inauthentic Asmat souvenirs typically sold as Asmat original art on the Internet and in souvenir shops.

50 From the most common global trade websites, say eBay, to the more local ones (e.g., the Indonesian Bukalapak), or trade-specific ones (e.g., indonesiaexport.com), the Asmat-mocking sculptures portrayed in Figs. 5–7 are quite often advertised as Asmat artefacts.

51 To further confirm this point, the sociologist and former director of the Melanesian Institute Franco Zocca, SVD showed me similar caricaturing statues. These had been given to him by guests as contemporary Asmat art.

52 “Ini kurang bagus, karena dia tempel-tempel, nggak asli kayu, Ini kayaknya tidak asli.”

(*Taman Bunga*) and in between the Aquarium, Insectarium, and the Heirloom Museum on one side, and the Imax Theatre and Confucian Temple on the other. It is hosted in a Kariwari-style building, the customary house of the Papuan Tobati-Enggros ethnic group, and is decorated with Asmat motifs and typical colours (red, white, and black).

At the heart of this hyperreal and Disneyland-like setting of the park,⁵³ there is this striking paradox: personalised replicas of Asmat carvings are sold as objects more valuable than the archetypes. Their maker, Awaluddin, is one of the employees of the museum. He guides me through the exhibition, which is organised in a modern and interactive fashion. Spirit canoes, *noken* (Asmat bags), shields, spears, sculptures, and even a human skull lie behind the display glasses. Certain spots are dedicated to living experiences: in the last room, visitors can get their photo taken holding signs in emoji language with life-sized Asmat people drawn on a photo booth background delimited by replicas of *mbis* poles. Right between this room and the previous one, it is possible to play reproductions of the *em* (traditional drum) or *fu* (signal horn) under the direction of the museum staff who imitate Asmat music performances in a hoo! hoo!-tribal-mocking fashion. Close to that spot, a label in English on the wall reads:

Every piece of art they [Asmat] create has a special meaning. This is an artwork that serves as a correlation symbol between the dead and the living [...]. Their carving works developed into artworks have a selling value and are desired by many societies. The resulting sale can help their economy.

Awaluddin, a jovial man—particularly generous for letting me in for free and giving me a complimentary museum booklet—admits that he has never been to Asmat. Nonetheless, his genuine passion for Asmat art (and probably his need to make some extra money) pushed him to start this business, competing in a way with *wowipitsj* (Asmat woodcarvers). His artefacts, mostly stone axes and sculptures, are shown under lock and key in the glass counter, right at the exit, surrounded by key rings, publications on Asmat culture, and miniatures of Sulawesi traditional houses. Carvings are made after the objects displayed in the museum, which has an extremely precious collection counting more than a thousand Asmat objects from different

53 E.g., Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, “Cartoons and Monuments: The Evolution of Political Communication under the New Order,” in *Political Power and Communications in Indonesia*, ed. Lucian W. Pye and Karl Jackson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 282–321; John Pemberton, “Recollections from ‘Beautiful Indonesia’ (Somewhere beyond the Postmodern),” *Public Culture* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 241–262; Greg Acciaioli, “Pavilions and Posters: Showcasing Diversity and Development in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Eikon* 1 (1996): 27–42.

areas.⁵⁴ When I ask the employee standing at the exit to show me Awaluddin's artefacts, he explains that these objects are *kombinasi*, a term to express the hybrid nature of the objects, which uses a combination of techniques not exclusively Asmat. He adds that the artist (Awaluddin) carved the objects himself and that these objects are particularly precious for being smoother and neater (*lebih halus*) than the Asmat ones. He concludes that authentic Asmat art can hardly be bought in Jakarta, while such *kombinasi* can be easily ordered and even customised.



Fig. 8: The Asmat Museum at Taman Mini.

Reconsidering authentic primitive art today

Ethnographic exploration of the Asmat region and Taman Mini thus points us to questions about what authentic primitive art is today, and what the reasons are for its topicality. The Asmat conceptions of uniqueness, Tuanban's reflections on the adherence of vernacular ethics in global settings, Awaluddin's *kombinasi* style, as well as Benny's colourful anecdotes at the Papua Pavilion, guide us to multifarious understandings of the notions of "authentic" and "primitive" in relation to art. These different

54 Risetyawati, "Museum Asmat TMII Sebagai Museum Identitas" (Master's thesis, Universitas Indonesia, 2014). See also Soemadio, et al., *Museum Asmat Taman Mini Indonesia Indah* (Jakarta: Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, 1986).



Fig. 9: Kombinasi style sold at the Asmat Museum.

interpretations, in turn, characterise the polysemic and dynamic nature of authentic primitive art that originates from the asymmetrical interplay between the different agents involved in the Art Zone.

Reflecting on the reasons for the centrality of this paradigm at present, it is interesting to note that if the increasing hybridity of low and high art, or of different styles, might seem to go against authentic primitive art, this is not the case. Indeed, as also remarked by Gunter Konrad, Ursula Konrad, and Carolina Winkelmann, the process of modernisation of Asmat art does not trigger cultural obliteration in the Asmat, but rather a “return to old values [...] [to] their own world and the cultural heritage of their past.”⁵⁵ This return to the past, in the ethnographic investigation, can be remarked in the strict and loyal adherence of Tuanban to the customary rules, but also in the “rough” style of Deki and Benny. These instances demonstrate Asmat attachment to ancestral traditions whose degeneration, within the dynamics of the global art market, can be found in the completely fake and sloppy Asmat souvenirs sold to tourists in Taman Mini. In turn, all of these, and each in its own way, are forms of resistance to the gentrification⁵⁶ of Asmat art that is epitomised by the “original” Asmat attempts of applied art and the non-original *kombinasi* style of Awaluddin. To this view, authenticity and primitivism—again, in the meaning of primeval—can be seen as their response to change.

⁵⁵ Gunter Konrad, Ursula Konrad, and Carolina Winkelmann, “Asmat Art,” in *Asmat: Perception of Life in Art*, 314.

⁵⁶ For the ideas of “civilisation” and “cultivation” in art, see Philip Yampolsky, “Forces for Change in the Regional Performing Arts of Indonesia,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 151, no. 4 (1995): 700–725.

This alludes to a further aspect emerging from the field that pertains to the Asmat people's rather bold spirit of adaptability to new (global) scenarios. Despite Asmat obstinate adherence to the customary norms, Tuanban demonstrates that Asmat hallmarks of authenticity can also adjust to unprecedented global settings. Given that, along with Edward Bruner,⁵⁷ authenticity has to be considered not intrinsic in the object per se, but the result of processes of authentication, Tuanban explains how the customary usage of certain kinds of wood can be altered for specific purposes (non-ceremonial objects) and under certain conditions (absence of raw material). This manifests the "glocal" habitus of the Asmat woodcarvers, that is, their particular attitude of manifesting global aspirations and openness to innovations while maintaining their ties with their artistic ethos. Indeed, as per Jac. Hoogerbrugge and Simon Kooijman,⁵⁸ their art is regarded as "vital art capable of translating new ideas and impressions in a creative way and thus represent[ing] an expansion of the traditional Asmat art."⁵⁹ At the same time, their habitus can also be framed as a form of resistance against the growing tendencies that promote massification, standardisation, falsification, and stigmatisation, which challenge and endanger Asmat authentic primitive art.

In conclusion, while the paradigm of authentic primitive art is obsolete and, *sensu* Errington, double dead, the relevance of the attributes "authentic" and "primitive" in reference to art seem to be in their original meanings and further understandings still alive. The comprehension of these notions can be fully grasped only by considering the intricate weave of relations of the Art Zone, and the heterogeneous constructions that emerge out of it.

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57 Edward Bruner, "Epilogue: Creative Persona and the Problem of Authenticity," in *Creativity/Anthropology*, ed. Smadar Lavie, Kirin Narayan, and Renato Rosaldo (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 331.

58 Jac. Hoogerbrugge and Simon Kooijman have been among the early promoters of the Asmat art formation process.

59 Jac. Hoogerbrugge, and Simon Kooijman, *70 Jaar Asmat Houtsnij kunst = 70 Tahun Seni Pahat Asmat = 70 Years of Asmat Woodcarving* (Breda: Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, 1977), 23.

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