

CHURCH AND THE ANCESTORS

Sacred *pir* mats from Asmat, Papua, Indonesia

Indigenous people around the world have responded to missionary religion in different ways. This exhibition tells the story of how Asmat people of Papua, Indonesia, have transformed Catholicism in accordance with their ancestral ritual life.



The Asmat region in the coastal and lowland southwest of Papua, Indonesia. The red dot marks the place of Sawa Erma within its mangrove river system. Map by Martin Brown

Tradition and invention in Asmat ritual

For generations, Asmat people have negotiated relationships with their ancestors, and with each other, through cycles of ritual. In a social world where there is no such thing as 'luck', relations with ancestral spirits are seen to be the cause of all success, failure, health or sickness. To repair relationships, Asmat people hold the *Jimi Pir* feast, which is framed around the secret production of a *pir* mat by women.

Asmat was first colonised by the Netherlands in the 1950s, and then by Indonesia. Feasting was suppressed because it was associated with ritual preparation for warfare. Since the 1970s, with the support of a missionary Catholic church, Asmat people have revived feasting in a pacified form. This revival has in turn transformed Catholic practices, which were reshaped around indigenous feasting. By creating innovative forms of material culture inspired by customary ritual, Asmat people mediate between ancestral spirits and a Catholic God. While Asmat men's ritual arts, in the form of woodcarving, are widely held in museums, women's fibre work – the focus of this exhibition – is rarely seen outside the region.

Villagers hold a *pir* mat during a baptismal feast in the forest. Tom Powell Davies, 2017





Christmas and the *Jimi Pir* feast

This exhibition looks at one particular transformation of ancestral ritual – how the indigenous *Jimi Pir* feast has been taken up to celebrate Christmas. Today, Christmas is marked by making a new *pir* mat which blends indigenous and Christian iconography. Made in secret, the *pir* is revealed in the church on Christmas Eve, as the culmination of a month-long feast. On Christmas Day, people mend strained relations by exchanging matching items which they have made for each other, such as Christmas bags. Where the pre-colonial version of the feast celebrated achievements in headhunting, in which the death of enemies was viewed as a source of new life, here the rejuvenation of the village is marked by rituals celebrating Jesus' birth. Both forms of ritual action please ancestral spirits, albeit in different ways.



Top: Celebrations on Christmas Day in the church in Sawa Erma. Tom Powell Davies, 2017

Centre: Ravela Ep and Eva Tórasimé demonstrate the rolling of a customary *pir* as used in feasting. Sago grubs are poured into the *pir*, before being shared amongst the community. The grubs develop within the decaying trunk of sago palms and are iconic of life emerging from death. Tom Powell Davies, 2018

Right: *Ésá Natal* (Christmas Bag) This innovative bag, developed for the church, combines ancestral and Catholic symbols. On the right side is the customary *eé tiní* motif, or crocodile vagina. The left has symbols of God's creation – the sun, moon and stars. Made for the museum by Balbina Bám and Fitalia Tóparamók, 2018. Pandanus, lime, ochre and charcoal. Collected by Tom Powell Davies. MAA 2020.24





Top left: Pir Kematian (Death), depicting elements of Asmat life that are broken. Hung on the west side of the Church

Top right: Pir Kebangkitan (Resurrection), depicting elements of Asmat life made whole again. Hung on the east side of the Church

Top centre: Pir Natal (Nativity) Mary is shown giving birth to baby Jesus in a traditional Asmat forest camp. She is flanked by Joseph and surrounded by all the things that are most important in Asmat life. This includes animals and plants created by God, and the tools which Asmat people use to navigate their environment.

Made for the museum by Eva Tórasimé, Ravaela Ep, Balbina Bám, Monika Mándepók, Maricé Tótinakáp, Bibiana Kákan, Virginia Tómbair, Monika Tótirú, Kasparlina Tóyakas and Vincent Túman, 2018. Pandanus, lime, ochre and charcoal. Collected by Tom Powell Davies. MAA 2020.18 , 2020.17, 2020.15

Ravaela Ep directs Virginia Tómbair and Bibiana Kákan in the painting of a pir mat for the museum. Tom Powell Davies, 2018

Commissioning the collection

The story of how ancestral traditions have been transformed within the church is largely unknown outside of Asmat. However, making a collection of Asmat Catholic arts posed a problem. It is forbidden to sell items from the church. Through discussion with senior ritual and church leaders, it was decided to commission prototypical examples of the original Catholic textile forms, but without the taboos associated with them. Ravaela Ep and Eva Tórasimé, two senior ritual leaders, determined the content of the collection. Ravaela and Eva wanted to make a complete set of copies of each of the twelve liturgical items made by women, so that the museum would receive everything needed to hold a service. This involved making not just a collection of objects – but rather, a new category of object – which sits outside of both ritual and existing art market contexts. To ensure that God was not angry about the commission, and that no harm came to its makers, the collection was blessed with holy water by the parish priest, Fr Vince Cole, before its voyage to Cambridge.

We are very pleased that this unique collection, which was created by the women of Sawa Erma specially for the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, is on display at the museum. It highlights Asmat women's achievements as makers, and the determination of the Asmat people, who have remade missionary religion in the image of their ancestral life.





Top: Women of Sawa Erma carry a Pir Natal or Christmas mat into the church on Christmas Day. Tom Powell Davies, 2017



Left: The crucifix in the Catholic church in Sawa Erma. Jesus is flanked with an úmamnák ésá bag, made only for senior ritual leaders, a conch shell, and two pir mats depicting death. Tom Powell Davies, 2018

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