While people in contemporary European societies tend to prioritise notions of permanence in such domains as cultural heritage and development, in Melanesia, notions of inevitable decay, loss, destruction and renewal prevail (Hermkens 2019). Among the Asmat people of West Papua, for example, lifecycle rituals and ritual cycles of headhunting were aimed at securing life force, *ji or ti* (van der Schoot 1969, 46) for constant renewal while *tes*, as an ‘ethical mediation’, similar to *mana* (Tomlinson and Tengan 2016, 20), was necessary to keep the cosmos in balance (Costa 2020, 64). As a meta-term pertaining to the Pacific region, *mana* is arguably most accurately defined by Valerio Valeri, as an ‘invisible substance’ that is ‘the efficacy of a working “fellowship”’, such as reciprocal relations with gods or ancestors (Valeri 1985, 99; see also Tomlinson and Tengan 2016). For Asmat, *mana* was gained through headhunting and, when successfully perpetuated through ritual cycles, would ensure society’s and individual’s *tes* (‘bravery’, ‘success’, ‘power’, ‘charisma’, ‘prestige’). Carvings of deceased people that were used during the related ceremonies were completed once these objects were left to decay, or destroyed, to release and perpetuate the life force of the dead.

In this chapter, we focus on what happens when such cultural logics of impermanence are pushed toward what Asmat perceive as permanence. This permanence has been engendered through pacification implemented through missionisation, government policies, museums and art collectors. Asmat understanding of the term ‘pacification’ resembles its general definition as ‘a process, in the course of which the state [and/or mission

8

‘We are not an emblem’: impermanence and materiality in Asmat lifeworlds

Anna-Karina Hermkens and Jaap Timmer
and art collectors] enforces its legitimate monopoly of power and brings wars between politically autonomous local groups to an end’ (Helbling 2006, 128). Asmat people’s reflections on, and conceptualisations of, pacification highlight both the colonial and postcolonial processes that have brought (and continue to bring) Asmat society ‘under control’, thereby creating an order of things experienced by Asmat as permanent or static. We will explore the perspectives of two Asmat men who reflect on the loss of tes and, concurrently, the importance of impermanence in relation to concerns about the future (and past) of their societies.

For Asmat, as for many other Melanesians, their cultural and social identity is entangled with ‘things’. Prominent Melanesianists such as Roy Wagner (1991) and Marilyn Strathern (1988, 1999) have argued that things transacted as gifts constitute personhood and relationships. In other words, pearl shells and beads, but also pigs, human blood, semen and so on, are part of people’s relational compositions. It is through the materiality and manipulation of these and other objects that persons and relationships are constituted, mediated and terminated (Hermkens 2019). Strathern claims that distinctions exist between persons but not so much between persons and things (Strathern 1999, 181). Her line of argument is that objects ‘do not reify society or culture; they reify capacities contained in persons/relations’ (Strathern 1999, 14). This constitutive relation between people and things is continuously reworked in the context of lifecycle rituals, such as initiation and mortuary rites, where the life-trajectory of humans is mediated through the manipulation of things (Hermkens 2013, 143; Bonnemère 2017). As noted by Annette Weiner, ‘the work of reproduction’, which is celebrated and constituted in lifecycle rituals, ‘is enacted with a counter awareness of the force of decay, rotting, and death’ (Weiner 1981, 7–8, in Herdt 1984, 202). And this awareness, and life and death themselves, are mediated through the creation and destruction of things, of objects.

James Leach (2015, 261–2) draws a distinction between two types of objects. On the one hand, he discerns things that can have the generative position of persons. These things, such as semen and blood, cannot be replaced as they are part of the constitution of persons and, hence, ‘irreplaceable’ (Leach 2015, 263). On the other hand, things may stand in place of something or someone absent. This especially occurs in death rituals, where the main person (the deceased) is absent, and the transformation of relationships can only occur through the mediation of objects (see also Silverman and Lipset 2016, 4, 7). Such objects are typically effective ‘through eliciting memory or affect’ (Leach 2015, 622). ‘The conundrum of absence is solved by channelling the return of the
dead primarily through things that stand for people’ (Hermkens 2019, 422). These objects, which once belonged to the deceased, are irreplaceable things connected to them or depictions of them, and are often manipulated in particular ways, activating social processes of remembering and forgetting.

Prominent in Melanesian mortuary rituals is the tension between maintaining objects (and human remains) as keepsakes, heirlooms and relics and destroying these personal objects to avoid interference from the dead (Lohmann 2010). Among the most famous examples of the intimate connection between evincement and destruction are the elaborate woodcarvings of Asmat and Kamoro people in West Papua. The metres-high, intricately carved Asmat bisj poles (Figure 8.1) are specifically made for a ceremony called the bisj mbu, which serves as a tangible promise by the living to avenge the death of the people carved into the poles (Kuruwaip 1974). The bisj are a vessel for transporting souls to the realm of the dead. After the ceremony, the bisj are taken into the sago swamps

8.1 Bisj festival in the village of Biwar Laut on 24 September 2018. The public presentation of the bisj poles in front of the jeuw (meant to initiate revenge) was tuned to the visit of an organised tour of American tourists and some carvers were expecting tourists to purchase the poles. Photo: Jaap Timmer.
and allowed to rot, their life force transferring to, and sustaining, the sago palms’ growth (Smidt 1993, 25).

For Asmat, these objects embody ancestors who, at set times, came into the cycle of life force that was transmitted through head-taking, sago production, societal fertility and male initiation. ‘Viewed as objects of spiritual force, there was an emotionally cathetic identification with them by the living descendants who had commissioned their construction’ (Schneebaum 1990, in Knauft 1993, 190). The objects trigger redress because of the life force of the ancestors who were present during the carving and remain in the carved object. Every act of war, every killing, destabilises cosmological balances; and, to restore those balances, the ceremonial cycle had to continue to generate life force for sustaining tes.

Securing the flow of life force enables ongoing restoration of the balance between poles of disorder and order, between decline and growth, between strength and weakness, between male and female, and so on. In that sense, Asmat cosmology embraces impermanence like the swing of a pendulum between degrees of entropy. Life force establishes order and thus constitutes humans and culture in a cyclical and evolving process of integration, which then comes apart in the dissipation and decay that accompanies the return to equilibrium. When the Catholic mission and the government abolished headhunting, this tethered the pendulum’s oscillation. As a result, at present, some Asmat feel that their life has come to a standstill and has lost tes. The circle of revolving life force is broken but most see that the pendulum still wants to swing freely. On top of that, collecting activities and Church and government programmes to promote and conserve Asmat cultures and provide economic activities to local communities have transformed Asmat art and culture into what some label lambang (Ind., ‘emblem’). By lambang, they mean ‘trademark’, in the sense that ‘Asmat’ has become an emblem that stands for headhunting, primitivism and primitive art.

This profound consequence of collecting, commercialising and conserving relates to two discussions in the fields of museum studies and anthropology: ephemerality and atemporality. The ethics surrounding care for ephemeral objects has been the topic of recent museum and heritage studies, opening up the possibility of embracing decay instead of pursuing the dominant conservation ethos (see Grünfeld, this volume). Relatively few studies have addressed the issues involved with curating mortuary objects – artefacts that were never meant to be displayed but destined to decay along with the human remains with which they were deposited. These studies highlight the dilemma between institutionalised ‘care’ and the concerns of local communities about the sacred and...
spiritual nature of these objects (McGowan and LaRoche 1996). Similar issues have been addressed in relation to the exhibition of religious objects, although the focus there has predominantly been on the three-way interaction between object, curator and visitor (see, for example, Paine 2000; Paine 2013; and Buggeln, Paine and Plate 2017). Questions surrounding the representation of indigenous communities in museums and collections have, fortunately, gained prominence in scholarly work. Most of this work has focused on ethics of display and the importance of researching and curating exhibitions in consultation with representatives of the cultures displayed (Karp and Lavine 1991; Krmpotich and Peers 2013; Carreau et al. 2018). However, the profound socio-cultural consequences of dominant Western curating practices for contemporary indigenous communities have been less acknowledged and highlighted.

The Asmat case illustrates how Christian, colonial and contemporary museum practices create powerful categories that evoke sentiments of being in a state of permanence. Asmat imagery is used by outsiders as a caricature, as a metonym for Papuan culture, as the trope of ‘headhunters’ and ‘stone-age woodcarvers in our time’ (Stanley 2002, 26). As observed by Nicholas Thomas, foreign collections often place indigenous practice ‘in an obscure domain antecedent to the culturally formative actions of Europeans, whether the evaluations of members of the avant-garde, or the classificatory practices of museum employees’ (2000, 277). This chapter highlights the complexities, existential dilemmas and anxieties that occur when inherently ephemeral objects come to stand for ‘Asmat culture’. In the following sections, we will discuss the processes of pacification that have forced Asmat toward permanence, followed by fragments of interviews with Martinus Tijup and David Jimanipits, two Asmat men, who reflect on the cultural loss of impermanence in relation to woodcarvings and concerns around the future of their societies.

**Erring pacification**

Asmat is a society of some 75,000 people who dwell in the plains of southwestern Papua, which has received scant ethnographic attention (but see Eyde 1967; Sowada 1961; Van Amelsvoort 1964; Schneebaum 1976; Simpelaere 1983; Sudarman 1984; Voorhoeve 1986). From the early 1950s onward, Asmat were pacified and converted to Catholicism by Dutch and American missionaries (De Hontheim 2011). The first missionary to arrive in the Asmat region was Gerard Zegwaard of the Sacred Heart Order, in 1950. Following a few more short visits, Fr
Zegwaard established a mission post in Agats, near the settlement of Syuru, in 1952 (Boelaars 1997, 7–8). After the gradual expansion of the mission to more remote areas, the American Crosier fathers and brothers arrived in 1958 and continued the mission in the region from 1961 onward. One of the main projects of these missionaries was pacification. Fr Zegwaard, in one of his early 1950s notes on Asmat, recounts local catechist Pahok expecting praise from the missionary after he told him that he had managed to kill all Nafaripi people to avenge the killing of his father. Fr Zegwaard reflects, ‘At that moment, I felt a deep gap between paganism and Christianity. How would I bridge that gap?’ (Zegwaard, cited in Boelaars 1997, 11, our translation).

The gap between state and society has always been rather wide. In a detailed study of Dutch pacification policies in Netherlands New Guinea, former patrol officer Hein van der Schoot (1969) recounts numerous problems in the engagement of outsiders with Asmat since the establishment of the first post in 1953. The Dutch colonial government forbade warfare, cannibalism, large-scale rituals and wife-exchange. These decisions were made on the basis of prejudices stemming from moral standards that were far removed from how Asmat saw the reproduction of their society. Furthermore, the sheer volume of issues and the vastness of the area meant that effective responses to violent outbreaks and ceremonies were difficult to implement. Overall, the focus was on ending warfare, as the government, as well as the mission, saw it as the main impediment to socio-economic progress. But how such progress might be achieved among Asmat was not clear to anyone (Van der Schoot 1969, 227; Van der Schoot 1998, 300–1).

Following a period of ambiguous Dutch government approaches, the Indonesian administration took off from firmer premises from 1962 onward. Following independence, Indonesia built modernist policy out of an ideological commitment to state socialism and a valorisation of pre-colonial history and culture centred on Java (Hooker 1993). The periphery needed to renounce its backwardness to be aligned with the centre; and, supported by prejudices about Papuans, this propelled a unified effort to eradicate poverty and civilise Asmat through the imposition of state power in the form of the abolishment of traditional practices. Teams, including armed forces and representatives of the government, went from village to village, forcing people to wear modern clothes, stay in the villages, burn their carvings, destroy the longhouses, and stop ceremonies and other customary practices (Sowada 2002, 53–4; Pouwer 2010, 246).
The new administration afforded no opportunities for Asmat to connect with ancestors or *tes* for balancing the cosmos. Most Indonesian government officials at the time assumed that all Asmat ceremonies and rituals involved headhunting and cannibalism, and hence prohibited these. When, from the early 1970s onward, tourists returned to Asmat in large groups (de Hontheim 2005, 77), eager to see performances, carvings and carving practices, Asmat took advantage of this foreign interest. The government, realising they also benefited from this tourism, subsequently relaxed their measures a little. However, at times, ceremonies would still be forbidden, and up until the 1980s, military commanders and civil servants continued to regard most Asmat cultural practices as involving ‘devils’ (*setan*).

In the following sections, we present and discuss local reflections on this history of nearly seven decades of pacification, which surfaced during Jaap’s conversations with a number of men during his research among Asmat in 2018. What came to the fore were the experiences of many, of trying to reconcile the Asmat past with Catholicism by fitting the ancestors somewhere in between and, from there, trying to engage with Indonesian development and progress. Others were dismissive of all things ‘Asmat’, apart from carvings, and appeared keen to be recognised by the state so that they could finally secure access to Indonesian modernity, education and healthcare. We focus here on Martinus and David, who both see that pacification has failed because key elements of Asmat life simply cannot be pacified – not by the Church and not by the government.

**Asmat cannot be pacified**

Asmat cannot be pacified (*tidak bisa diamankan*), we still need to follow the ancestors and we will need to kill, we will always be on the move, because we need to restore *tes*. It is hard these days, but we can’t escape it. The church, the government and ‘the museum’, ‘they have made us into an emblem’ (*mereka telah melambangkan kita*). But we are not an emblem. We are a people with needs and a culture that cannot be pacified. Our culture, our past needs to be valued higher (*harus dimahalkan*), it cannot be ‘reduced’ (*memurahkan*) (Martinus Tijup, Ewer, 20 September 2018).

Martinus’ reflections on his world highlight two interconnected concerns. First, the urge to restore *tes* and continue the cycle of life and death, and
second, the widespread concern that Asmat people and culture are reduced, rendered smaller and insignificant. In highlighting the ongoing need for sustaining *tes*, Martinus advocates for restoring the prestige that is not embodied in the cheap emblem (*lambang*) that Asmat has become. By being reduced to an emblem, Asmat have become contained and permanent. Martinus’ conception of *murah* (‘worthless’) – the root of *memurahkan*, ‘to make something cheaper’ as opposed to *mahal* (‘valuable’) in *dimahalkan*, ‘to value higher’ – needs to be read in that manner. Pacification, according to Martinus, refers to a process by which such foreign forces as Church, government and art collectors bring their terms of order, stability and permanence to bear on Asmat ways of being. Some of the men Jaap spoke with in the villages of Per and Ewer are also concerned about the loss of *tes* and fear that, if Asmat drift away even further from their ontology, they will be fully ‘pacified’ (*diamankan*). Too much pacification means loss of life force and *tes*, resulting in complete dystopia.

Significantly, Catholicism does not have the power to avert the decline of life force, and, as a result, Asmat are keen to bring traditional ways of maintaining *ces* back into their lives themselves. Some men mentioned the need for headhunting as a way to replenish life force and showed war paraphernalia stored on the rafters of their houses. Others addressed the importance of carvings for returning *tes*. However, Martinus sees the Asmat carvings that are bought by outsiders, as well as those made for decorating churches, as emblematised or even ‘secularised’ versions of previously ‘religious’ objects. From servicing original Asmat ways of being and constituting *tes*, they have become permanent (and hence, pacified) objects in public exhibitions, including at the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress.

The Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress was established by the Catholic Church in the early 1970s in an attempt to preserve local woodcarving traditions. According to Martinus, however, the museum does not instigate moral regeneration as the mission had envisioned. Instead, it generates moral degeneration through its timeless aestheticisation of Asmat woodcarvings. For Martinus, the museum embodies the ills of ‘pacification’ because, through its exhibitions and curatorial practices, Asmat are being transformed into an emblem, thereby effectively annihilating ‘Asmat impermanence’. Part of the museum’s curatorial practices that constitute a key factor in the process of emblematising Asmat are the yearly carving contests and cultural shows that commenced in 1980. Following a selection process conducted by staff of the museum, carvers are invited to display and market their
works at a showground in Agats (Stanley 2012, 143–69; Sowada 2002, 59–60; Biakai 2002, 67). By 1983, the Crosier Mission’s newsletter reported that:

. . . carvers are beginning to identify themselves as a special group with a support system concretised in the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress and its staff. For instance, one of the carvers from Per recently invited both Mr Yufen Biakai and Mr Erick Sarkol (the two-member staff of the museum) to a spirit mask festival in Per. The carver insisted before fellow villagers that ‘my men’ have to witness this traditional feast. . . . We hope again that the annual cultural festival can be another important aspect in the conscientization process so important for these people now (Third Cultural Festival 1984).

The consciousness-raising alluded to here hints at the essence of the mission’s goals in the region. In 1973, Alphonse Sowada, OSC, then Bishop of Agats, reported that, following years of fragmented efforts to Christianise Asmat, it was now time for the mission to focus on ‘the whole man’, ‘to free themselves from inhibiting factors such as superstition’ (Sowada 1973, 15). The main failure of the mission thus far was its lack of understanding and appreciation of Asmat ways of being in the world and failure to comprehend that baptism ‘enslaved’ them. ‘This enslavement consisted essentially in the belief among the Asmat – especially the elders, that baptism afforded them the magic key by which they would be able to obtain cherished materials imported from the outside’ (Sowada 1973, 10). To address these ostensibly inhibiting beliefs, the new integrated mission approach included (besides better schooling and cooperatives for economic development) appreciation for culture, in particular Asmat woodcarving. From his inaugural speech onward, Sowada had been convinced that collecting, documenting, preserving and studying Asmat art were important for the realisation and appreciation of Asmat culture (Stanley 2012, 113–16). While understanding that Asmat woodcarvings ‘are essentially vital religious expressions of art’, Sowada’s support for continuing this tradition attempted to strike a balance between old meanings and some form of resocialisation of Asmat carvings (Sowada 1985, 11).

The mission’s interest in Asmat art coincided with UN efforts to regenerate and sustain local artforms, or handicrafts, as a form of development aid. In the early 1970s, art collector Jacques Hoogerbrugge, in his role as project manager of the Fund of the United Nations for the
Development of West Irian (FUNDWI), which stimulated markets for Asmat crafts (Mbait 1973), deemed the conditions favourable to rebuild the prestige of the master woodcarvers and to support them in continuing the good quality of work. ‘Comparison with former-day carving reveals that the present-day carvings (notwithstanding adaptations and minor changes) have succeeded in maintaining their Asmat identity’ (Hoogerbrugge 1973, 29). When Hoogerbrugge left, the project lost momentum, but people continued to produce carvings for sale and for small local ceremonies (Schneebaum 1990, 27). Around the same time, the Catholic mission followed FUNDWI’s advice regarding the importance of stimulating Asmat handicrafts. As the Indonesian government strongly opposed the revival of longhouses (Omberep 1973, 34) in which carving used to be taught and practised, the mission came up with the idea for an Asmat museum.

The Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress was founded in 1973 with generous support from the Catholic Church, assisted by numerous foundations and individuals such as Gunther and Ursula Konrad, Tobias Schneebaum and Nick Stanley. Schneebaum recounts the shock and awe of young Asmat during their first visit to the museum. All of a sudden, they were exposed to objects embodying ancestral powers, objects with which they were not meant to engage (Schneebaum, in Stanley 2012, 119). David Simni, an elder from Syuru, was stunned to see objects of ‘his former life’ when visiting the museum for the first time, and began to wonder why all those objects were brought together in the museum (Schneebaum, in Stanley 2012, 119). When Schneebaum explained to him that the museum was for all Asmat to appreciate the qualities of the past, Simni asked, ‘but who sleeps here?’ (Schneebaum, cited in Stanley 2012, 119). Simni’s question refers to the intimate connection between woodcarvings and the longhouse (jewu): the spiritual, cultural and political centre of the community. In the past, this is where men would sleep, ancestors dwelled, skulls hung from rafters and carvings were made. In most villages, the jewu no longer fulfils all these functions and has often become simply a meeting place for men to welcome visitors and stage performances for tourists.

At the time of the opening of the museum, the role and meaning of carved objects were already changing rapidly and there was a gradual deconsecration of the carvings and growing ignorance of the objects’ original contexts, among both Asmat and foreigners. The assessment of carvings by outsiders often betrayed the typical tendency to place Asmat carvings (and thus Asmat people) in particular temporal frameworks, basically as belonging to a past characterised by headhunting, cannibalism...
and overall primitiveness. Appreciation and condemnation of woodcarvings often follow this temporal classification: adding value to ‘art’ and museum pieces, while compelling Indonesian government officials to wield civilisation programs within the official nation-building policy. The government, as noted earlier, feared that carving might evoke headhunting and other ‘primitive’ behaviour, and, as a result, banned it for a time. However, increasing volumes of collectors and tourists, coupled with pressure from the Catholic Church, forged renewed interest and evoked ideas around preserving this cultural tradition (Stanley 2012, 112–42).

Significantly, the inspiration for the aforementioned programmatic plans for maintaining or rebuilding ‘Asmat identity’ derived more from mission and art collectors’ ideas than from Asmat reflections on their situation. In fact, most of these foreign visions stand in stark contrast with how Asmat experience their carvings. As we will discuss in the next section, Asmat views reflect the tensions and inequalities between them and outsiders, which derive from – and continue to shape – Asmat interactions with art collectors and tourists, as well as with ‘development’ and ‘mission’, and with Catholicism in particular.

Carving Jesus

Commissioned by the Church to carve a statue of Jesus for the new church building in Ewer, David Jimanipits, school teacher and renowned carver, has retreated from much of society. In the sago grove (dusun) behind his house, under the shade of sago palms, he has cleared a spot to work on the statue, or corpus as he calls it.

During a conversation with Jaap about the making of the statue in September 2018, David remarks that the ethos of carving in Asmat has changed dramatically:

Nowadays, we even have Islamisation. There’s a growing amount of Asmat converting to Islam and more and more migrants from across the sea come here to make a living. This all distracts people from organising their own lives and managing their communities. The policies of the government around woodcarving are also not helpful as there are too many interests and too many voices, and since the American Crosier Brothers left, the Catholic Church has become the government’s associate in this. At the same time, people continue to
struggle how to match (memadukan) Asmat stories about the origin of the world with Genesis. People are losing their roots (akar) and no longer know where they are going.

You see, Jaap, when I visited the Netherlands in 2013, I spent too much time in the Indonesian Embassy in The Hague. I had no time to visit the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam where there is a canoe that I made and that was collected by Kooijman. I am not sure when Kooijman took it from here, it was in 1980s or in the 1990s. There is also a drum I made in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and I have also visited a museum in Chicago where the collection is under the ground.

It is interesting to see that people in those countries store our culture while we forget about it. The roh (‘spirit’) and the nyata (‘the tangible’, ‘the real’) is in our own culture, but they [foreigners] love our culture more than we do. That’s more evil than colonialism (Itu lebih jahat daripada kejajahan). They say that the Dutch colonised, that the Japanese colonised, but look at what is happening now... That there are so many Asmat carvings abroad does not help us. Foreigners come here for their own collections, for business, for art sales and what have you. Why do these people want to collect? Maybe because they see that our carvings are made by ancestor spirits?

Surely, they have power; they stun people. All these objects have spirits, some in those museums even more as they have the old strong spirits from the past. If you watch them for a while, like for three hours, you will see them move. They are not fixed or dead; they are alive. That goes to show that our culture is not a culture of preserving objects. But people now want us to make carvings for museums and churches.

Take this corpus, it is yet another story. I have tried hard to put a spirit in it! I was successful. I had to hide the workplace so no one was going to disturb me. Even the pastor cannot just come by and check on the progress. It needs to be a quiet place. If there [were] no spirit, the carving would have no meaning. If it has a spirit, the carving can give us strength, it can bless us. We call this spirit teser or mystery [or the sacred]. It is a mystery because it is outside our space, it has much stronger power (daya). It is with all my strength that I can get the teser in the corpus. It is from my inner self (batin) and not from my ancestors.

There is no connection with the ancestors. That is not allowed. They are guarding the process, that’s all. Christian statues are not
like Asmat statues. The ancestors give no guidance. I start from an illustration and the ancestors are just guardians. What I bring into the statue is the same as what people call ‘God’; it is the Holy Spirit, like the strength of Jesus in our lives. It is that kind of spirit that makes it possible for me to make the corpus. So the power of God goes into the corpus through my *batin*. *Batin* cannot be translated into Asmat. You will sense the power once it is in the church. People will be stunned, they will be in fear, they will sense the power in the corpus (David Jimanipits, Ewer, 20 September 2018).

The key difference David discerns between Asmat carvings and Asmat Christian carvings concerns their respective dependence on ancestor spirits and the Christian mystery. In the case of Asmat carvings, the ancestors guide the maker or even, according to some, carve the statue, with the result that the final object is imbued with their power. Ancestral power lives on and keeps carvings alive, including in foreign collections and even when these objects start to emblematise ‘Asmat culture’. In contrast, ancestors are merely guardians during the making of the statue of Jesus. In fact, the efficacy of the corpus depends not on the ancestors but upon David’s piety, his Christian *batin* (inner self) and his relationship with the Holy Spirit to give it spiritual (Christian religious) power. Hence, the corpus is not an Asmat carving in the sense of an embodiment of

![David Jimanipits and the corpus, as well as the Last Supper, that he is carving. Ewer village, 19 September 2018. Photo: Jaap Timmer.](image-url)
ancestral spirits or, in past contexts, a medium for ancestors to intervene in the lives of the living and move on to the afterlife, or for people to avenge the ancestors. The corpus does not do that.

According to Catholic theology, the corpus is a spiritual object that only gains power after it has been blessed by a priest or bishop and has become part of the Church’s inventory. It will then be a sacramental, a sacred sign. Unlike Asmat carvings, which are embodiments of the ancestors, sacramentals become sacred only through the Church’s intercession and its blessing. Only then do they become a vehicle for God to work through. Moreover, while Asmat carvings require impermanence to sustain *mana* and *tes*, sacramentals like the crucifix require and evoke permanence to keep the faith in Christ alive. As David emphasised, ‘it [the corpus] should not decay, no bugs are allowed to eat it’.

David’s reflections on the Jesus statue, the Christian mystery and his *batin* in relation to ancestors in Asmat carvings contrast sharply with Nick Stanley’s observations about a crucifix figure in the church of Kristus Amor in Sawa, northwest Asmat. Stanley suggests that this crucifix figure embodies the spirit of Christ in the same way as a *bisj* pole. This pole is arguably the most iconic Asmat ancestor figure for remembrance of the dead as well as a warning and initiation of vengeance (Van der Zee 2009, 42). Conflating salvation with vengeance, Stanley sees that ‘so strong is the identification with the Christ figure carved by Yiwirjak that it has evoked “contagious” imitation’ (Stanley 2017, 124). While we agree, as would David, that the Asmat Christian object also becomes an actor in a ritual enactment, the syncretism – let alone imitation – that Stanley observes is not recognised by any of our interlocutors. Instead, they emphasise that Christian statues are not imbued with life force and, hence, do not evoke redress, unlike *bisj* poles and all other objects classified as *ecopok* or *tereipok* (Costa 2020, 175–86).

In fact, the permanence of Christian statues positions them outside the category of Asmat carvings and locates them firmly inside Catholic logics and other frames of thought and action that originate elsewhere. This becomes especially clear when discussing the impact of Christian and Western doctrines of permanence on Asmat art. According to David, the Church and museums’ ontology of permanence eradicate objects’ life force and agency, reducing Asmat carvings and the Asmat peoples themselves to mere emblems:

In the eyes of priests and also curators, the objects in their collections die. The moment they are obtained makes everything certain about them. They stop communicating with the object, they display it with
the meanings attached to [it] at the moment of collection. What they know about the object hardens and becomes definite. There then is where the Asmat emblem comes from and is nurtured. Our objects in the hands of outsiders stand for our primitiveness, our cannibalism, our headhunting, and all the rituals our ancestors engaged in (David Jimanipits, Ewer, 20 September 2018).

Martinus and David, who both critique the process and state of ‘Asmat’ permanence, point to the importance of ensuring greater Asmat agency over conscious self-formation through impermanence, a dawning ethics of a revolution, perhaps, in relation to original Asmat rituals as sources of tes.

**Toward a new future’s past**

As stated by Nicholas Thomas in his introduction to the volume *Melanesia: Art and encounter*, ‘art has loomed large in the lives of Melanesians for millennia’ (*Thomas 2013*, xi). While material culture remains significant in local lives, Melanesian objects have also been abandoned, replaced by Western products, prohibited and destroyed, and systematically collected by colonial agents (*Thomas 2013*, xi). Entering European, Russian and North American collections, objects from the region have been ‘admired, fetishized even, treated as specimens of one sort or another, classified and published, or put away in museum stores’ and private collections (*Thomas 2013*, xi). This chapter has shown how not only objects but also indigenous people themselves have become ‘emblems’ due to foreign practices of ‘pacification’ and their collecting and museum displays.

The experience of Asmat having become an emblem is a critical reflection on the meaning attained by Asmat carvings in museums, private collections and tourist imagination. The Catholic Church and the long tradition of museum and art collecting, coupled with government policies, have contributed to this. The Church and state have caused an excessive reification of Asmat culture through the establishment of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress, the organisation of Asmat cultural shows, exhibitions of Asmat art in museums and galleries, and, in line with these efforts, attempts to ultimately tame unruly Asmat, by making them into either ‘good Christians’ or ‘civilised citizens’. In all these projects, Asmat have been pacified by the often-deliberate absence of any reference to the deep cultural meanings and context in which these objects have been made, both in the past and the present. References to
headhunting are only made to promote ‘Asmat culture’ and its material representations abroad.

The permanence forced on Asmat woodcarvings has generated a complex paradox. While many in the region are quick to state that the mission and the government brought peace and that people are happy that most of the violent practices of the past have been left behind, according to Schneebaum, ‘the majority continue to believe they are surrounded by spirits of all kinds, combining the old with what they understand of the new Catholic or Protestant faith’ (Schneebaum 1990, 28). However, many Asmat sense they cannot reconcile their emblematic identity, and its stubborn haunting of past headhunting and ancestor ‘worship’, with Catholic principles. This past is often drawn upon as an ironic commentary on the impossibility of pacifying the Asmat: to reconcile Asmat ideas around impermanence with Church and state doctrines. People challenge the Church’s demand to make a break with their past and live in the present to prepare for redemption. Asmat insistence on the need for te and the related impermanence of objects – their untameable nature, as it were – is not merely a counter-discourse but also alerts us to other futures inherent in the impermanence of Asmat objects.

Asmat reflections on their past are inherently connected to global processes of colonialism and imperialism and recent regional projects of revival. Colonialism has, to a large extent, directed ‘the development of ethnographic museums and the growth of the collections’, especially in Europe (ter Keurs 1999, 69). These museums, but also other institutions, have traditionally been used to evoke a sensibility of order, continuity and tradition, through a linear temporality and a sense of permanent materiality (see Introduction and Chapter 18 of this volume). Moreover, anthropological thinking about material culture has created a dichotomy, whereby the social and material have been viewed as distinct conceptual domains (Bell and Geismar 2009, 6). The result is that curatorial practices in ethnographic museums (which, until recently, were the domain of anthropologists) have also dominated conceptual approaches to ethnographic objects. These values of permanence and particular approaches toward materiality continue to inform contemporary anthropological thinking as well as curatorial and ‘revival’ practices. Recently, attempts have been made to reinvigorate the making and protection of ‘customary’ objects in the Melanesian region (see, for example, Akin 2014 and Hermkens 2019). Sometimes, this revival occurs with the assistance of institutions that, paradoxically, often had been established due to, or had benefited from, colonial expeditions. While
these efforts to protect and preserve indigenous material culture seem to be directed to confound time through preserving objects that will outlast humans’ physical selves, ephemeral objects confound time not through permanence but through renewal. These latter values clash with inherently Western values of care and conservation.

As this chapter has shown, cultural concerns for the ephemeral and metaphysical significance of artefacts can be antithetical to the museum approach, which subjects objects to particular forms of care. It cannot be assumed that the removal of an Asmat bisj pole by a collector or museum is analogous to its gradual decay in the sago swamps. As argued by Jeudy-Ballini in the context of Sulka dance masks, ‘non-visibility . . . is not to be equated with a form of destruction’ (2004, 111). For Asmat, the flow of tes is redirected outside the cycle of death and renewal, with Church and government ‘care’ imposing a form of permanence that results in cultural fragmentation and destabilisation of local ontologies. This illustrates how politics and ethics of care are effective top-down forms of governmentality (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Likewise, museum professionals have customarily viewed themselves as possessing ownership over the care, conservation and curatorial practice of indigenous material culture (McGowan and LaRoche 1996, 115), thereby controlling, denying or even oppressing indigenous subject positions. In particular, European museums have been criticised for working alongside ‘a powerful White Western denial and disavowal of the implications of colonialism in museums’ (Sandahl 2019, 75).

For museums to effectively decolonise, lingering Western sensibilities located within contemporary practices of conservation and curating ethnographic material need to be addressed. An Asmat ‘museum of impermanence’ might be one path to pursue the constitution of new ethical forms of subjectivity and the acceptance of inevitable decay and need for renewal, also for Western academics, societies and institutions. Such a museum would have to be conceptualised by Asmat as part of their search for possible pasts that suit their horizons of expectations (Koselleck 2004, 259–63). As this chapter has highlighted, some have embarked on this search by recognising Asmat objects in the hands of missionaries, museum curators and art collectors as inscribed with a past that has been violated. This is a reminder that these objects:

are not what we have been socialized and trained to see: standalone artifacts whose inscribed content exists for experts to interpret. Rather, they constitute part of the material worlds out of which people’s rights are made manifest (Azoulay 2019, 30).
It remains to be seen how Asmat are going to dislodge their emblematic past and generate a future that reimagines and embraces the impermanence and renewal of Asmat worlds.

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Notes

1 Melanesia, a concept of colonial origin, refers to lands and peoples in New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia.
2 On the basis of recent fieldwork in the village of Atsj, Roberto Costa defines ces (the inland variety of tes) as ‘a multifaceted force that captures potency, talent, bravery, pride, prestige and ethical prescriptions’ (Costa 2020, 4).
3 Timmer (2011) observes a similar process for Tehit people in West Papua’s Bird’s Head.
4 Protestant missions from the Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM) have been active in the region since 1955 (de Hontheim 2011, 93–101).

References


Voorhoeve, Clemens L. 1986. ‘“We, people of one canoe – they, people of wood”: Two Asmat origin myths’. *Irian, Bulletin of West Irian Development* 14: 79–125.