



## In Balance

### Expressing an Integrative World View through Mirroring Art Motifs

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**Abstract.** – The worldviews of the Asmat in southwest New Guinea, as visualized in the symbolic motifs carved on shields and other artifacts, are found to be in coherent proximity to several social and cultural practices associated with this society. Responsible for this congruency is a constituent factor discovered throughout a broad range of phenomena practiced by the Asmat. The factor distilled from an analysis of Asmat customs can be defined as a structuring paradigm. It is characterized by an integrative qualification and outlines a framework of thought which has a molding function on social practices. [New Guinea, Asmat, art motifs, naming, cosmology, social system]

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### Introduction

The unique character of their carvings is something like a trademark for the culture of the Asmat who live in the western half of New Guinea. Works of art from this region were already popular collector's items, well before the members of this ethnic group were interlinked with the economic and social worlds surrounding them. The carved wooden objects enriched collections and show rooms as exotic artifacts. With the increasing integration of the Asmat territory into a global system of economic and social interpenetration in the 1950s, Asmat carvings were extracted from their cultural context. The uprooting from their original cultural ground uncou-

pled the objects from their original purpose and, consequently, from the meanings of the designs. An Asmat spectator views the designs of a shield of his ethnic group differently from someone who is not acquainted with the cultural ideas passed on through such an artifact. The later is unfamiliar with the prototypes (see Gell 1998: 25) an Asmat carver or an Asmat viewer has in mind when confronted with certain design elements. Non-Asmat viewers, therefore, tend to understand the ornamentation carved on the object through an aesthetic approach common to their cultural environment.

In the living room or the glass cupboard of a museum, the carvings were then at best admired because of the aesthetic quality of the stylistic ornamentation typical of artworks from this region. This alienation led to a loss of meaning originally carved into the artifacts. To contextualize artistic forms within the cultural environment they were designed for would be to bring again the original meaning to appearance.

Ornaments carved on wooden artifacts are endowed with a cultural function and specific emic meanings. Since the 1950s, ethnographic research regarding Asmat ceremonial events has explicated the link between the ornamentation of ritualistic objects and the concepts on which the rituals were based (see, for example, Gerbrands 1967). Carved wooden objects were originally produced for ritual purposes.

It is the worldview of the Asmat, their social and cosmologic concepts, which are visualized in impressive arrangements of artistic designs. Patterns,

which we consider ornamental, are actually formulations of Asmat worldviews encrypted in a symbolic code and translated into carved designs. They express a very specific understanding of human existence.

In what follows, I propose to trace the original meanings coded into specific design elements which can be found on Asmat artifacts. A supporting argument for this tracing project comes from Alfred Gell. He criticizes the reduction of theories on visual art to aesthetic criteria because such an approach obscures symbolic meanings imputed on the index and the agency of artifacts. He sees art as a “system of action” combined with the possibility of initiating and forming changes in the world (Gell 1998: 6). The contextualization of art in relational behavior “in the dynamics of social interaction” (10) clarifies the relevance of art within the dynamics of social processes (6).

Another aspect must be mentioned, although it will not be considered here. Changes of stylistic forms of expression are in fact an understudied phenomenon in Asmat societies. This is due to the relatively short observation period of Asmat culture which covers only a few centuries. From the 1950s onwards, impulses for the most striking changes originated not from innovative ways of expressing their concerns but from the expectations with which foreigners and outsiders approached the artifacts they were interested in (Schneebaum 1985: 49).

Concerning cultural ideas and concepts, Schneebaum warned against drawing an inference from particular locations to the entire Asmat region. He investigated essential differences in the ways a carving is understood in different villages and regions of Asmat. He identified specific design patterns as renditions of specific realities and described how their references vary from place to place. For instance, he illustrated how comparable symbolic designs indicated testicles of larvae in one river region, while in another village they symbolized the intestines of worms (Schneebaum 1985: 17). Accordingly, I have documented as precisely as possible village and person from whom I obtained which data. All the same, my intention in this article is to collate evidence in support of the thesis of an underlying basic paradigm and idea equipped with a forming determination. It unites forms of expression in the Asmat culture throughout their region. The evidence described below serves as source material which substantiates the theory propounded here.

How can we imagine the conceptual ideas an Asmat carver composed into his works of art? Methodically, I shall situate carved stylistic elements of Asmat material culture within a wide range of social and cultural procedures. This juxtaposition will en-

able a decryption of the basic paradigm which is responsible for the formation of specific symbolic designs. A contextualization of the carving will serve as a method to decode and understand the meaning hidden behind these fascinating designs.

## Mirroring of Motifs by the Asmat

One of the main stylistic characteristics of Asmat art is the “duplication” of design elements. From a Western point of view, we tend to be touched by the coexistence of multiplied patterns covering Asmat artworks. They often consist of motifs duplicated and combined to typical designs. This characteristic stylistic feature roots the artworks in the Asmat culture.

The configuration of pairs of design elements on Asmat shields was noticed and described as early as 1934 by H. J. Brauholtz from the British Museum in London. His documentation dates from a time long before the systematic research of the Asmat culture had been initiated. He describes a characteristic style of the designs carved on shields, i.e., features of paired arrangements of pattern elements in a “ridge and groove” style. Because his analysis only considers three samples it is not very convincing. Apart from this pattern he also recognizes the derivation of the “principal designs” from human forms (Brauholtz 1934: 153 f.).

Having a far more extensive selection of samples at his disposal, Ad Boeren was able to differentiate between three scalar levels of the ornamentation on an Asmat shield: a single ornament assembled of basic elements, then a group of at least two ornaments, and lastly a total arrangement covering a large part of the surface of the shield. He recognizes that all three fields are composed by the reflection of an element or an elementary group either along a horizontal or along a vertical axis (Boeren 1995: 267). His formal analysis corresponds with the analysis of symbolic images as developed in this article. They are composed by the mirroring of one partial element of the image. In Boerens’s formal analysis these images are described as groups of ornaments in the second level of the shields’ design. Concerning his analytical approach I would like to point out that an analysis of the modular elements of shields hardly achieves significant indications for the meanings formulated into the designs. Boeren concludes his analysis by drawing a parallel between the linked ornamental elements and the linkage of “human and animal head-hunters” and “successive generations” (1995: 279). On the other hand, I shall demonstrate in the following how

an analytical investigation of symbolic design elements can generate information regarding the meanings communicated in a cultural group by specific designs.

Anthropologist Adrian Gerbrands also dedicated a large part of his fieldwork in Asmat to the ornamental motifs which decorate carvings. In one of his publications, he reproduced illustrations of Asmat war-shields and contextualized them with detailed descriptions. Gerbrands's scientific contribution not only lies in his meticulous elaborated documentation of Asmat carvings but also in his analytical remarks appended to these descriptions. Some of his annotations are worth mentioning in the context of the present discussion. Gerbrands points to the meanings encoded into art motifs carved on the rendered artifacts. He draws attention to the mirroring of two-dimensional symbolic motifs carved on shields in form of reliefs. The description of one of the shields mentions both a vertical and a horizontal mirroring, an image mirrored along imaginary vertical and horizontal axes. The mirrored images result in a symbolic motif and represent ancestors.

Vertically mirrored images symbolically refer to one and the same person. They represent specific features belonging to an individual. Such doubled images can be found, for instance, in the motif of double hooks engraved upon traditional shields originating from the coastal region referred to as "Central Asmat." Each double hook symbolically represents a single person. The referential significance of the duplicated image – that it refers to one person – extends to horizontally mirrored double images. Gerbrands documented several shields and could attribute duplicated mirrored images to specific deceased persons. In some cases he even managed to uncover the name of the represented ancestor (1993: 125–129).

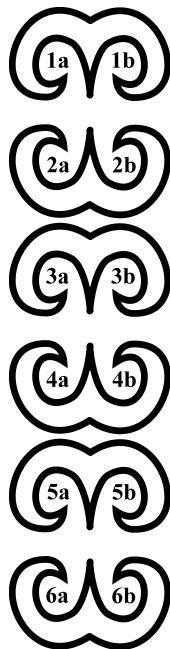
Ancestors who excelled at martial combat were commemorated in shields. The shields were thought to summon ancestors for armed conflicts. According to Dirk Smidt, symbolic designs covering the front side also refer to relatives of the ancestor the shield is devoted to. The spirits of the ancestors were regarded as supporters in a martial confrontation (Smidt 1993: 23). Headhunting attacks were generally scheduled in the early morning hours. A warrior would carry a shield along for two main functions. The shield could be a frightening sight for an enemy and it was loaded with magic power. The ancestor the shield was devoted to was thought to be present with his protecting power but also with his aggressive fighting spirit (Schneebaum 1985: 55 f.).

The link between warrior and ancestor plays a key role in my discussion of a phenomenon which

can be found in carving designs on Asmat shields. The carved pattern analyzed here demonstrates the inadequacy of a theoretical point of view advocated by Alfred Gell. He asserts a reduction of "geometric" (i.e. non-representational, or marginally representational) decorative designs" to a non-representational signification. He primarily recognizes a pattern as an indication for a contextualization of the ornamented object in relation to the person who owns it. This approach would exclude an understanding of a design carved on a war-shield of the Asmat as representation of a specific ancestor the warrior seeks to be linked with. It would reduce the effectiveness of the shield to its holder. The design would identify the shield as a "prosthetic" of the owner (Gell 1998: 73 f.). In contrast to this thesis I argue that the design carved on an Asmat shield has an intimidating impact on the enemy because of its relation to the spirits of ancestors, as represented by the design. That is, why I disagree with Gell's distinction between decorative and representational art: it does not account for the efficacy of a shield's linking with specific spirits of concrete individuals as described here. Gell explains a repetition of pattern elements and their symmetrical design in a formalistic way, reducing the analysis of patterns to the relation of neighboring motifs (1998: 76 f.). An alternative approach, that is far more useful in solving the research question addressed here, is to interpret a pattern as a symbolic form of expression.

In 1960 and 1961, Gerbrands spent eight months in Amanamkai, an Asmat village near the southern coast. For the purposes of ethno-aesthetic research there, he initiated contacts with wood carvers who lived in the settlement, and he was able to establish friendships with some of them. In Asmat society, wood carvers derive prestige and social status from their craft. Clients offered carvers food and delicacies from the jungle in exchange for their handiwork. Respect and status granted by fellow villagers were the principle rewards for a carver (Schneebaum 1985: 42). This privileged position was bestowed on the carver since he had a particular knowledge of cultural coherences. Gerbrands's intimacy with some of these esteemed representatives of Asmat settlements enabled him to collect valuable insight into the meanings of the symbolic images encoded in the woodcarvings. Gerbrands investigated images rendered on carvings produced for ritual purposes as well as those that decorated weapons, dugout canoes, and paddles. He categorized and analyzed mostly two-dimensional symbolic designs, documenting important contextual information regarding their ritual functions (Gerbrands 1993: 23; Lamme and Smidt 1993: 146). Being on intimate terms with

the village's carvers, Gerbrands was able to identify each of the "mirror-image pairs of curled motifs" carved on two shields as ancestors. In some cases he managed to link the images to particular deceased relatives: (Gerbrands 1993: 126 f.; Plate 8.12: shield RMV 3790-529) and (Gerbrands 1993: 128; Plate 8.13: shield RMV 3790-526).



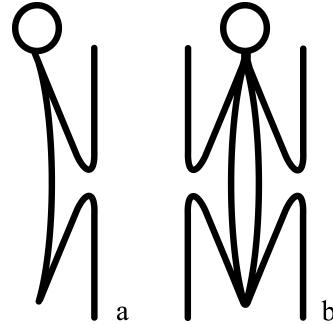
**Fig. 1:** Schematic rendering of the arrangement of motifs carved on an Asmat shield (see Gerbrands 1993: 127; Plate 8.11: shield RMV 3790-528)

Gerbrands's interpretation of the shield RMV 3790-528 is remarkable. Fig. 1 reproduces a schematic rendering of the motifs carved on this shield. Gerbrands expresses some uncertainty as to the meaning of the horizontal doublings (1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5, and 6). "It is not sure if each of the three pairs of reversed hooks refer to an ancestor, or if each double hook does so separately" (Gerbrands 1993: 126). His interpretation of the horizontal mirroring differs from his understanding of mirroring across the vertical axis. According to Gerbrands, this horizontal duplication of symbolic motifs can be interpreted in a twofold manner. Following his first interpretation, the horizontal mirroring of a double hook, forming two double hooks opposite from one another, represents a single ancestor. In this case the total design carved on the shield would represent three individual ancestors (1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6).

In contrast, Gerbrands mentions a second possible interpretation for such a series of horizontally mirrored motifs. According to this alternative, under-

standing the horizontal mirroring could refer to two different people. Each of the double hooks, also the reversed ones, would then refer to an individual ancestor. In this case, the six double hooks would represent six ancestors (Fig. 1: numbered from 1 to 6).

Doubled hooks are not the only symbolic images of the Asmat which feature mirrored images and represent ancestors. One additional motif that Gerbrands mentions is the *kavé*. *Kavé* is the term for a specific symbolic image the Asmat use to represent one of their ancestors. To this end, Gerbrands describes the *kavé* as comprised of the mirrored image of a praying mantis,<sup>1</sup> which symbolizes a headhunter for the Asmat. As depicted below, two praying mantises arranged back-to-back form the figure of a human being in a squatting position, which symbolizes a deceased person (Gerbrands 1967: 92). Once more, an ancestor is rendered in a work of art through the mirroring of an image. The motif now consists of two opposite elements.



**Fig. 2:** Carved glyphs of the coastal Asmat: *wènet* (a) a headhunter symbol and *kavé* (b) representing an ancestor.

One question remains unanswered. This question concerns the idea connected to the rendering of a distinct person with two (1a and 1b) or with four curves (1a, 1b, 2a, 2b), or with two abstract images of a praying mantis on the design of a carved Asmat artifact. How could the concept, which underlies

<sup>1</sup> The praying mantis is called *wènet* by the Asmat. Gerbrands identified this insect as a headhunter symbol. Its symbolic value is based on its human appearance. The way it turns its huge head, polishes its hair-fine feelers, folds and cleans its long arm-like legs, is reminiscent of the way in which humans move. Apart from that, this insect gives the impression of being assembled from several sticks. The Asmat identify trees with humans and humans with trees. Being comparable with a tree is, therefore, a furthermore human attribute. And, last but not least, an additional habit of a female *wènet* is not insignificant here. She bites off the head of her male partner after mating. This makes the insect a predestined object for a symbolic representation of a headhunter (Gerbrands 1967: 30).

such aesthetic forms, be described? The forms of artistic expressions which the Asmat use to represent their ancestors are obviously based on a dualistic principle. In what follows I explore various facets of Asmat social and cultural life in order to identify the foundational ideas that become visible through the presence of mirrored motifs in Asmat art.

### Analysis of Mirroring of Motifs

Having thus described this specific form of artistic expression of the Asmat, I shall now offer an interpretive analysis of the phenomenon of mirrored motifs. I compare the visual idiom with a traditional phenomenon practiced in an entirely different field of Asmat life. Specifically, I compare engravings to the practice of naming persons.

Why are naming practices used here as a comparative counterpart to the domain of art? The reason for this choice can be found in its specific function. In the context of the Asmat culture, the function of naming practices is comparable to that of mirrored motifs. Both the symbolic art images and the names of persons are references to humans, and as such they fulfill the same function.

In analyzing the mythic tradition of the Asmat people residing in the southern coastal region on the Fayit River, I encountered a significant naming practice. This enabled me to document the ethno-specific custom of bestowing an alternative name. One particular myth, presented in the form of a song, referred to a number of persons and mythical beings, such as animals and rivers, alternatively by both their names and, at other points in the narrative, by specific counter-names. An additional name differs from the double name, a first name and a surname as common in our Western social context. We also use this couple of names in order to address a person added to one another. The alternative names assigned to an individual by the Asmat are never used successively in a sentence. One of my Asmat interviewees from the Casuarina Coast region, Lukas Bayua from Biopis, distinguished between names and “left” names, but could not give an explanation for this categorizing. The alternative or “left” name<sup>2</sup> is never simply added to the original name; it is exclusively used as an alternative. Moreover, in contrast to both parts of a double name as we use them, the two alternative names are charac-

terized by equivalence. In a Western context, first name and surname are in an asymmetric relation to one another. There is a difference between calling somebody by her/his first name or calling her/him Mrs. or Mr. X.

The equivalence of the two alternative names is expressed by a symmetrical formal structure upon which the song’s text is based. This structure becomes evident in the use of the two names assigned to the heroes in the mythical story. 24 of the 29 documented stanzas deal with one of the two mythical heroes. 16 of the 24 stanzas show a clear division into two more or less equal-size halves. In each of the stanza halves, one of the names, either the name or the left name of the hero, is used exclusively. In 11 of these 24 stanzas a dualism rigidly structures the text. Both halves of these stanzas are nearly equivalent in length. The name is mentioned nearly as many times as the counter-name in the opposite half block of the stanza. The documentation of this analysis indicates an even more comprehensive binary structure within the mythical text. A more lenient reading of certain ambiguities in the translated texts would result in a higher number of stanzas showing a precise dualistic structure. These ambiguities arise from inaccuracies in the transcriptions and translations.

To sum it up, it can be said that the majority of the song stanzas show a symmetrical use of the names assigned in pairs.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, a dualistic concept determined by the paradigm of equivalence must be assumed as a structuring element of the mythical song text (de Antoni 2010b: 187f.).

The gendered aspects of the name-giver’s identity must be investigated in a broader context. For the Asmat the origin of names is more a question of originating from our world or from the world of the deceased. V. F. P. M. van Amelsvoort reports naming concepts practiced by the Asmat of the Bisman group as well as by communities on the Casuarina Coast. This corresponds with the region in which I was able to carry out my investigations. Van Amelsvoort describes how the Asmat children are given two different names. A child receives one name from the “spirit of the tribal father,” a paternal ancestor of the family group the child is born into. This occurs a few months after birth. The name is “communicated to the contact person” who also “informs the child of the whereabouts of his personal

<sup>2</sup> The name of the mythical hero in the song is “Saumat” and his left name “Sawini.” The mythical story describes his relation to a woman named “Tayuruwiata” or with her left name “Naminiyoru” (de Antoni 2010b: 60–87).

<sup>3</sup> The described appellation of opposite names also concerns mythical creatures such as dragons or animals in myths and in one case even a river. Animals are considered to be animated with a soul essence. That is, why they are also described as human personalities and behave like human beings.

spirit family along rivers and in sagogrounds, and his individual obligations to it." When the child is approximately two years old it is given a "human name" by its parents (van Amelsvoort 1964: 51). The "contact person" mentioned above is described more precisely by Gerard Zegwaard (1982: 39 f.) as a "seer" and is generally female. Only in exceptional cases do men act as seers. Regarding the named persons there is no obvious preference for one of the sexes. In the example mentioned above, the male hero Saunat<sup>4</sup> is provided with the alternative name Sawini, just as his female opposite Tayuruwiata is alternatively addressed as Naminiyoru (de Antoni 2010b: 186–188; 2013: 11–73).

An unambiguous dualism structures not only how ancestors are represented in wood carvings but also the practice of assigning names. Commenting on the transcription and the translation of the Saunat song, representatives of the Asmat repeatedly gave the same explanation for the above described custom of naming. The assignment of an alternative "left" name was thought of being a precondition for a person "to be in balance"<sup>5</sup> (de Antoni 2010b: 187–

189). Unfortunately it was not possible to specify what my interviewees meant by this balance. I had the impression they would not have been able to formulate such an interpreting definition. But what they managed to communicate with their commentaries was that being "in balance" was a positive attribution.

The explanation given by Asmat people corresponds with the structural balance realized in the mythic song by a way of a recitation of alternative names. Two opposing factors are in a specific constellation, in equilibrium with each other. Moreover, they are related to each other but are not in an oppositional relationship. Rather, they are side-by-side and in a symmetric equivalence with one another.

To address a person with an alternate name is to bestow upon this individual a positive and important attribute. This statement will serve as a premise for the following considerations. According to my informants' intimations, positive quality can be paraphrased as "a being in balance."

In conclusion, according to the Asmat, the personality is seemingly considered in a dualistic manner. Human individuals are perceived as having two dimensions or spheres. They are marked by two different and alternative names. And a balance between the dimensions is esteemed as something desirable. Balance is achieved when a counter-name is in use and these two spheres could be referred to with the two alternative names. A closer definition of the dimensions or spheres is a matter of speculation for me. As already mentioned, I have no documented statements that would help defining these dimensions or spheres which were aspired to be in balance. However, the findings Voorhoeve and Zegwaard discovered could help clarify the issue raised. According to their mainly unpublished documentations, the Asmat perceive the act of conception as initiated by an ancestor, in particular by the "tribal father." He sends the "spirit child" to a woman destined to become pregnant (Amelsvoort 1964: 49 f.; Zegwaard 1953, 1954). This understanding gives the child's biological father a peripheral role in reproduction. The act of sexual intercourse is thought to shape the physical characteristics of the unborn child (van Amelsvoort 1964: 50). Thus children simultaneously originate from ancestors and living relatives. This understanding of conception could indicate that the two differing names, on the one hand, refer to the living community and, on the other, to the realm of the deceased ancestors. This concept also explains

4 The story of the mythical hero Saunat is devoted to people who stayed back in a village when a majority had left the village for some reason (de Antoni 2010b: 111). Saunat has an extramarital girlfriend called Tayuruwiata who becomes pregnant. Because of his passion for hunting, Saunat spends most of his time in the jungle. While Saunat is out hunting pigs and cassowary with his brothers and men from his family, Tayuruwiata dies in childbirth. The scene of the mythical storyline oscillates between the two realms, the world of the living and that of the deceased, on the other hand. The border dividing both becomes blurred. Tayuruwiata tries to find Saunat. She manages to catch him and together with the child she takes him in a dugout canoe. She brings him to the *yai tamutapis*, a ceremonial house for women who died in childbirth. Here Saunat is tied to a pole of the house. The women go fishing and Saunat frees himself with the help of a spirit couple. They help him escape and bring him back home with a dugout. Together with Tayuruwiata he returns with his dugout and his paddle decorated with carvings and feathers. After being welcomed by his family members they celebrate his funeral (de Antoni 2010b: 101–108; 2013: 11–73).

5 It was Lukas Bayua from Biops who explained the application of two alternative names with the necessity for the people to be in "balance." He assisted me in July 2007 by transcribing and translating the mythical song of Saunat recorded on tape. The song had been sung by people from Nanai from the southern Asmat region. According to C. L. Voorhoeve, the so-called Casuarina Coast Asmat language is spoken in this area with the Batia dialect (1980: ix). In the course of the translation process of the mythical songtext, the following names were identified by Lukas as being in reference to an opposite name. The counter-name, which he categorized as a "left" name, is listed in the following synopsis after the name, separated from the name by a slash. This categorizing as a "left" name was confirmed by a further interviewee from Basim (de Antoni 2010b: 187): male mythic hero – Saunat/Sawini; female mythic hero – Tayuruwiata/Na-

the oscillation between two realms of existence, as well as the merging-together of these fields which characterizes many Asmat myths.

According to the ideal of existence, every being is related to several pairs of fields. Each half of a pair ought to be as well balanced to the opposite half as possible. Asmat myths provide details that may help in identifying and concretizing the two opposing fields between which balance must be struck. The halves of each pair are capable of oscillating and merging with one another. The tale of the hero Saunat is one example for rendering this traditional conceptual model in mythical themes. The framework of action in this narrative is characterized by fields of tension which oscillate and merge. Incidentally, a multitude of Asmat myths follow similar parameters. Here the pair consists of two realms of life: social life pre- and postmortem, both located within our earthly world. In the Saunat myth these two spheres are both interlinked and parallel, accompanied by the assigning of alternative “left” names. This parallel coexistence is a strong indication for a correspondence of the meanings of the two described dualistic concepts – realms of life and names. However, it is assumed that an individual is exposed to and aspires to be in balance with other dialectical fields as well.

An explanation for a comparison between the mirrored images rendered in carved artifacts and the symmetry of assigned alternative names has already been given. Analogous features in each of the practices dealt with here provide the basis for a common explanation for both. The balance between two existential realms, which is a desirable quality for a person, serves as an interpretive explanation for the symmetry of mirrored images in the carved motifs. The term “balance,” therefore, describes a fundamental concept which also determines the design of the carved images symbolically representing a person (see Table 1).

All three examples evince a fundamental influential source which enables the development of a balance-like state. A same basic principle is responsible for the development of the three specific cultural phenomena. This principle could be described analytically as a symmetric paradigm by which the described cultural phenomena are shaped. This ethno-

specific paradigm is a fundamental principle which represents a characteristic feature of the human personality in the Asmat’s point of view. This principle is specified as a notion of equivalence and balance between two existential fields. The research of van Amelsvoort describes a possible specification of these existential fields (1964: 51). Following his findings, the fields could be paraphrased as the world of the living and the world of the ancestors, or in the case of reproduction, as earthly origin and descent from ancestors.

Are these examples exceptional cases, or can the constitutive efficacy of the principle be extrapolated to further phenomena of social and cultural life of the Asmat? An answer to this question has to be discussed in the following.

### The Integrative Principle in Asmat Social Practices

Integration could be defined as a status contrary to an imaginable separation or opposition. In the above section I have argued for an integrative tendency within basic social concepts related to two different fields of social and cultural life of the Asmat. Are the described examples singular phenomena? To what extent do the two cultural customs the mirroring of images and the adding of an alternative name comprise unique instantiations of the integrative principle? Could these possibly be symptomatic examples of a general cultural phenomenon of the Asmat? The question how far the integrative paradigm penetrates into other fields of their social and cultural life is yet to be answered.

An integrative influence pervades the dualistic concepts applied to social and cultural phenomena of the Asmat. These include phenomena which could be summed up as being in a “duality in oneness,” just as such being in a state of “binary opposition.” The distinction between a parallelism of two aspects ascribed to an individual and an asymmetry of two dimensions which a person belongs to is doubtlessly helpful. However, based on the following arguments, such a distinction is irrelevant for the considerations developed here. The two categories are separated from one another by blurred

**Table 1:** Relevant Factors Disclosed by a Comparison of the Fields.

	curve	praying mantis	naming
multiplication factor	2 or $2 \times 2$	2 or $2 \times 2$	2
symmetry	symmetric design	symmetric design	equal application
fundamental idea	? balance ?	? balance ?	balance

boundaries. Belonging to one of these depends on the reference point from which an object is defined. To relocate the point of reference is to potentially change how it is categorized, whether as “duality in oneness” or “binary opposition.”

The form of naming exemplified here could be regarded as a form of parallelism regarding “duality in oneness,” as both names refer to one and the same person. But the very fact that “balance” is an aspired qualification for a person suggests that a lack of balance is a very real possibility. The confrontation of two names, which are not necessarily balanced with one another, poses a contradiction to oneness. Even if rendered in symmetric images, they refer to two asymmetrical aspects of a human’s personality which are not comparable with one another. These aspects could also be in an oppositional relation to one another. The mirrored and inverted positioning conclusively suggests an oppositional understanding of the bestowal of two names. From this point of view a “binary opposition” must be assumed. In the carving art of the Asmat both a binary opposition but also a parallelism is expressed by the artistic expression of mirroring.

Just as binary oppositions are accompanied by specific regularities, this also applies to the phenomenon of duality in oneness. A causal efficacy, on which the origin of such a dualistic orientation is based, would represent one of these regularities. Furthermore, the concept that explains the realization of oneness in duality is a constant factor involved in the formation of corresponding phenomena. Such causal presuppositions and conceptions represent connecting elements of phenomena which can be classified as oppositional but also as parallel. Both of these specific elements are applicable to both categories of phenomena. Apart from this, duality in oneness would not exclude the existence of a principle which supports the maintenance of the oneness, even if a dual specification of subareas of the concerned subject is obvious. An integrative principle could prevent the two spheres from drifting into an oppositional state; it, therefore, promotes an egalitarian and symmetric coexistence.

A form of existence aspired by the Asmat is premised on the integration of parts which otherwise could possibly glide into opposition. Such an integrative paradigm is not limited to the domains of myth and the plastic arts. As a principle, it outlines a framework of thoughts by which practices and behavior are constituted in many areas of Asmat social and cultural life. A number of documented examples support such a hypothesis. Integration can also be observed in additional fields of Asmat social and cultural life. An integrative principle seems to

be the basic paradigm upon which the diverse practices and activities of this ethnic group are based (de Antoni 2010b: 183–222). Assuming the integrative principle to be a typical and characteristic phenomenon of Asmat, we can anticipate the discovery of further examples formed by its influence. The description of additional phenomena would further evince my hypothesis of a principle which is constitutive for the ethnic identity of a group. Both the amount of other comparable examples as well as the degree to which the phenomenon was influenced by the principle may be regarded as criteria which serve as evidence for the hypothesis drawn up in this article.

To complete this train of thought, I shall outline a selection of other social practices that testify the foundational relation of the fundamental integrative paradigm of Asmat social concepts. The examples discussed below can be considered as a widespread context in which the described aesthetic motifs and naming practices are embedded.

One of these examples concerns exchange proceedings between groups, which of course present different issues than are observed in the integration of diverse aspects of an individual’s personality. What I intend to demonstrate is the fact, that one and the same principle serves as governing influence in both relational fields, the integration of personal dimensions as well as dynamics between different subgroups of the ethnicity. An influential principle passed on in the group not only is responsible for culturally emic phenomena concerning the individuals but also for relations between groups.

This can be seen with regard to barter and trade which involves both single persons and social groups. Emic concepts of trade and exchange are a further example of social and cultural practices of the Asmat which are marked by an obvious integrative principle. Traditional practices presuppose a symmetrical relationship of both bartering partners, as anthropologist David B. Eyde investigated in his study of Asmat exchange proceedings in the village of Amanamkai. Returning from harvest in their clan’s sago grove, a husband and wife were expected to distribute specific portions of their sago harvest to certain relatives. One of these shares was destined for the wife’s father and a portion equivalent to half of that was allocated to her brothers and the husbands of the husband’s sisters. The recipients were obliged to return the favor with fish, meat, or sago larvae, but never with sago. Sago is reciprocally exchanged for flesh and flesh for sago (Eyde 1967: 202).

Eyde details the reciprocal exchange of sago, fish, and other comestibles among members of As-

mat kin groups. Apart from describing these economic transactions, Eyde contextualizes them by explaining the practices which accompany such moments of exchange and which contribute to the transformation of Asmat social structure. The social structure of Asmat groups is determined by specific features of stratification, and certain individuals accumulate prestige and power accordingly. According to Eyde, rank is partly inherited. But it is also reinforced by the recognition of one's contributions to the group, such as skilled craftsmanship, success in hunting, or bravery in war. The ability to provide food for others is an acknowledged means of garnering prestige within the clan group (Eyde 1967: 232–235). Generally, generosity which is reciprocated with prestige relies on one of two accomplishments: successful warfare or polygynous marriage, which opens access to resources from the bride's family. Both modes of accomplishment result in an increase of available sago areas, thereby extending the amount of resources that the holder can now distribute. These two accomplishments reinforce or create the individual's ties to consanguine and affinal relatives, to men's house groups and eventually to an entire settlement (Eyde 1967: 349).

Eyde devoted a large part of his research among the Asmat to trading activities within kin groups, but he also describes exchange practices between groups that are not related. He documented Asmat peoples' intentions for initiating trade relations outside the kinship group. These exogamous transactions often carried the purpose of establishing friendly terms with other groups. According to Eyde, the reciprocal exchange of food between kin groups and villages was often initiated with the intention of developing or consolidating friendly relations between the parties (1967: 283–286).

An asymmetric trade relationship composed of a dependent buyer and a dominating trader is incompatible with the principles underlying Asmat concepts of exchange. Trade dissociated from social relations is hardly imaginable and it is, therefore, for the Asmat always attached to an integrative factor. Anthropologist Peter W. van Arsdale investigated the changes in Asmat society manifested in the town of Agats. There he observed that Asmat generally shopped at stores they were acquainted with or at those which were visited by fellow clan members or relatives (van Arsdale 1978: 215). The Asmat see commercial operations as something traditional, as something based on a reciprocal pattern (220). This reciprocal principle implicates an integrative impetus bringing the two commercial partners even closer together. The inclusive tendency which under-scores trading practices facilitates the establishment

of social ties to the broader kin groups represented by the exchanging persons. By way of communicative practices that accompany an exchange, members of the trading partners' kin groups are also entangled in the social consequences resulting from the trade activities. Obviously, economic deals are connected to an integrative paradigm.

This observation helps us to understand the inability of the majority of the Asmat to integrate into the economic system which was introduced from abroad and now dominates trade processes in their country. A mode of exchange that follows Western standards is not egalitarian, and it directly opposes traditional Asmat economic behavior. Under the economic conditions which merge from this mode of exchange there is no symmetrical relation between buyer and seller as determined by reciprocity.

The same integrative principle that influences exchange relations can also be observed in the mythic tradition of a group living in the far interior of the Asmat region. An origin myth told by the Kau, an Asmat subgroup living in the northeast area of Asmat, describes balanced terms of exchange as a precondition for social coexistence. This unifying function of reciprocal exchange is thematized as an essential detail of the narration. In the story, one of the protagonists shares his prey with his brother. The recipient is expected to keep the dwelling clean as a reciprocal compensation. However, he does not fulfill this requirement. As a consequence, the protagonists are separated from each other (de Antoni 2010a: 419). Integrative action is crucial for the awareness of ethnic unity. Here again exchange is loaded with an inclusive element.

Further evidence of the integrative tendency can be found in a tradition which is rarely practiced among present-day Asmat. G. A. Zegwaard, and later P. W. van Arsdale, described and documented this traditional practice based on their fieldwork in the village of Syuru and Eyde investigated and analyzed it in Amanamkai (1967: 205–210). In the past, it was customary for two befriended, married men to formerly establish kin relationship between themselves and their wives. The friendship would grant a permanent *papisj*-relation considered equivalent to a kin relationship. With the precondition of all four participants' consent, an occasional sexual exchange of the partners was arranged in this relationship (Zegwaard and Boelaars 1982: 21 f.). Such a *papisj*-relation was generally established between two different kin groups not connected by relational ties and possibly residing in different settlements or different moiety halves. *Papisj* was thus one of the social institutions constituting alliances between clan groups or villages (van Arsdale 1978: 37). As

such, this traditional practice is categorized among the social fields which are determined by an integrative factor.

Traditional Asmat ideas regarding warfare are further evidence of the integrative concept's determining influence upon social and cultural behavior. Headhunting raids, which are no longer practiced, represented a convincing example of such an integrative paradigm. An irreversible, absolute dichotomy differentiating friend from enemy was unimaginable given the concepts that had developed around war and martial activities and that were passed down from generation to generation among the Asmat. Warlike attacks were often initiated with the purpose of creating alliances. Zegwaard studied this practice in the coastal area around Syuru and Atsj and succeeded to understand basic motives of headhunting. Returning home with the head of a male victim whose name was known to the head-hunters (Zegwaard and Boelaars 1982: 40f.) enabled the initiation of a young man into adulthood and his animation by the spirit-soul and, thus, with the identity of the victim. The initiated young man henceforth would act as kin of both communities, that of the aggressors as well as the group they attacked (Zegwaard 1959: 1027). A specific form of integration was aspired through this martial strategy. Once more, the integrative principle was decisive in the development of very specific practices.

A final example of a realm of life determined by inclusiveness lies in Asmat cosmology. Asmat regard the world as one-dimensional. The Asmat understandings of the world rely on a concept of relationality that binds a plurality of spheres of life to one another. This concept implies an interwoven coexistence of multiple realms. Consequently, the two main spheres of human life are located geographically in one and the same world. Both the sphere occupied by deceased persons and the sphere populated by Asmat living in the span between birth and death are found on this earth. According to the belief of the coastal Asmat, ancestors reside in spirit villages upriver from their former settlements (Voorhoeve 1965: 236). These locally separated realms are integrated, or even more than that are interwoven with one another by ritual practices mainly linked to liminal and transitional stages of life, such as coming to life, becoming adult, and leaving life.

This cosmologic idea is partly based on cultural memories of migrations which occurred in the distant past. Ancestors are said to have left the inland regions close to the mountain range that covers New Guinea from East to West. Traces of a memory of leaving this region for the coastal lowlands corre-

spond to the notion of ancestors having settled further upstream.

Reminiscences of migrations play an essential role in the ideas passed down through generations in Asmat societies. They are reflected not only in cosmological worldviews but also in the notion that ancestors reside in areas on earth. Mythic traditions can also contain remembrances from long ago. A Kau origin myth, to give an example, illustrates how historic remembrances are woven into mythological motifs. The historical migration route traced by some members of this Asmat subgroup can in fact be reconstructed through a mythical narration (de Antoni 2010a: 417–419).

The Asmat think that their deceased ancestors are undergoing a process of transformation, thus, affording them a new incarnation within the world of the living. Evidences for the belief in such processes can be found in numerous villages, including Asatat, Ewer, Momogu, Pupis, Sagapu, and Syuru as well as the Asmat regions in which shields are carved for ritual purposes (de Antoni 2010b: 213f.). Living and already deceased humans exist side-by-side in one world. In certain geographical areas, both groups can have contact with one another. These spaces are defined locally and can also be marked off temporally through a special commemorative feast. The Asmat experience encounters between the living and dead within their everyday life. Once more the integration strived for by the described principle has to be differentiated from fusion. The integration concerns two opposite fields which retain their individual character. It manifests in a coherent view of two fields within a joint context. The two fields remain in their separating individuality but are linked. Living and dead realize themselves as undivided and interwoven. Once more, an integrative principle seems to govern social life.

My interpretation of the motif of mirrored images that appears so frequently in Asmat carvings is thus made possible by contextualizing this aesthetic expression within a wide range of the ethnic group's cultural practices and social behaviors. This extended context demonstrates the far-reaching relevance of an integrative principle. The limits of its sphere of influence have to be expanded with each discovery of a field that bears the determining influence of the integrative principle. This clearly shows the contours of a structuring principle which has an influence on widespread aspects of Asmat life.

## Conclusion

The starting point for this investigation was the striking similarity among various elements found in a selection of diverse Asmat social and cultural phenomena. The domains of ethno-specific practice considered here concern forms of community life, just as the ways members of this group express their worldview. Traces of an underlying coherence connecting the analyzed practices and customs revealed a specific causal principle by which all of the investigated phenomena are determined.

Research goals deciphered this principle, defining it as specifically as possible and identifying its functions. A precise definition of the structuring principle was enabled by a comparison of diverse domains of social and cultural life.

The characteristic feature marking this principle – one that has been passed down from generation to generation within this ethnic group – must be defined as integration. Equipped with this integrative quality, the principle represents a basic pattern type which functions as a template for practices and cultural modes of expression. Its pattern-like quality and determining function suggest addressing the principle with the Greek term “paradigm.”<sup>6</sup> The principle’s structuring capacity facilitates choosing the defining term of a structuring paradigm for the principle dealt with here. The paradigmatic integrative principle would be an adequate terminological formulation to express the dominant and creative specification of the themed principle. The principle determines specific customary practices just as the other way around these customs, seen in an overall view, outline the integrative structuring pattern itself.

The Asmat make use of the integrative principle when developing practices relevant for their social and cultural life. This inclusive principle represents a framework of thought that enables the selection of specific forms of customary habits. Apart from that fact, the creation of innovative ways of organizing and managing life may become necessary when a society is exposed to changes in living conditions. In such a case, transformations in several processes of everyday life may be required. Thus, this paradigmatic structuring principle has two central functions. First, this principle provides a distinctive characteristic feature for distinguishing whether a specific behavior is compatible with the group’s identity or not. The second function concerns the creation of new practices. In this case, the pattern supplies standards and benchmarks which enable the creation of novel variants of practices and behaviors.

6 *Parádeigma* (ancient Greek): example, model.

One further function, which has to be assigned to the paradigmatic principle, emerges from the structuring principle’s guiding role in the development of social and cultural customs. As a matter of fact, the principle underscores a broadly diversified range of fields. Based on this, the structuring principle must also be considered as the causal reason for the linking of customs and practices to a network.

Apart from materializing a link between forms of managing social and cultural challenges, this principle contributes to the constitution and molding of collective identity. In addition, the characterizing specification identified within Asmat social life and cosmologic thought also functions as a distinguishing mark of social identity. There is a two-fold perspective concerning the perception of the fundamental feature which constitutes the collective consciousness of group members and represents their identity. The differing perception is due to different points of view an observer can take. From the emic point of view the structuring principle which forms a network of social practices imparts upon group members an awareness of differing from others and belonging to their specific ethnic group. From outside the group, on the other hand, this principle is regarded as a distinctive mark of the respective group. This is the case for the structuring principle dealt with here. It is part of the group members’ self-awareness but also a distinguishing feature which characterizes them for outsiders.

The motif of mirrored images designed by the Asmat as a symbolic representation and carved on shields is thus formed by an integrative pattern which is in turn based on this ethnic group’s specific structuring paradigm. The same applies to the corresponding phenomena identified throughout various domains of Asmat ways of being and acting. The structuring principle has influence on a wide range of social and cultural phenomena. With the Asmat this principle is characterized by a very typical specification, namely by being “in balance.”

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