



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

USAID LESTARI: STORY FROM THE FIELD

PROTECTING FOREST TO PRESERVE LOCAL CUSTOMS

By: Wahyudin Opu

“Forest has been very generous to our lives ever since the time of our ancestor. Carving is our way to show respect to our ancestors and the forest. Therefore, when we are collecting woods we do not do it carelessly. We would only select ironwoods that are suitable and ready to be carved, this is to ensure that our ancestor will continue to bestow us with luck and good fortune.”

To the Asmat, woodworking is not mere art, but also holds spiritual meanings and serves as a medium to connect with their ancestors. Forest is therefore considered important by the Asmat because it allows them to make a dialogue, spiritually, with their ancestors.

The sound of chickens' crowing and birds' chirping broke the early-morning silence in Yepem Village, Agats District, Asmat. Usually, people have started their activities outside before the sun rises. The engine noise of motorboats and laughters of children bathing and playing in the river start becoming more noticeable as a new day begins. At the same time, some fishermen can be seen heading to the forest.

Yepem Village is not located far away from Agats City, the capital city of Asmat. It normally takes 20 minutes to reach Yepem Village by motorboat from Agats. This proximity brings its own dilemma. On one hand, ease of access allows fishermen to sell their fishing catches, including karaka (mangrove crabs) and prawns, and various other forest products effortlessly. On the other hand, rapid industrialization combined with rocketing population due to migration eat away local values, customs and traditions of Asmat Tribe.

The concern is shared among all Asmat elders. *"The present generation no longer knows how to [properly] utilize forest. They carelessly destroy [the forest]. Forest destruction will threat tribal lives,"* said Primus Osci, a respectable figure in Atsj Village.

With a shaky voice, Primus explained how the forest in his village is deteriorating from loggings that is carried out by migrants. We do not need to enter the forest to see the destruction. We can notice it just by looking at wood slashes from loggings flowing on the River Bets.

Protecting Forest through Woodworking

To the Asmat, the forest and their tradition are two side of the same coin. Both are vital asset for Asmat tribe and is therefore inseparable from their daily lives. The Asmat believe that their first ancestors were made out of trees. Their ancestors then gave life to other members of the tribe who currently reside in the south coast of Papua. This folktale remains alive until today and is even carved on wood crafts.

Asmat's carving patterns are always about their origin and their ancestors to show respect to them. To the Asmat, woodworking is not mere art, but also holds spiritual meanings and serves as a medium to connect with their ancestors. Every single carving represents the interaction between humans and nature and the past lives of Asmat tribe.

Paskalis Wakat, a woodworker in Yepem Village, said that carving is a way to respect their ancestors and the nature. *"Forest has been very generous to our lives*

since the time of our ancestor. Carving is our way to show respect to our ancestors and the forest. Therefore, when we are collecting woods we do not do it carelessly. We would only select ironwoods that are suitable and ready to be carved, this is to ensure that our ancestor will continue to bestow us with luck and good fortune." he said in Yepem Village last month.

Their ancestors taught the Asmat to preserve nature. For making wood crafts they are forced to be selective and taught to only use ironwoods. *"Ironwoods grow naturally in the forest. As long as they are not used exhaustively, they will always be available,"* said Paskalis who also chairs the Carving Association of Asmat Regency.

Ironwood is considered the strongest and the most durable wood compared to others. The tree can only be cut down when it is old enough. *"When the branches have become dry or broken, then they are old enough",* he explained. If the wood is too young, the carvings will not be durable. *"The wood may already be broken even before the carving is finished. That means, the ancestors are unhappy,"* said Paskalis.

Preserving Culture Through Jew

Besides carving, the Asmat is also well-known for their Jew, a traditional house built only for bachelors. Most of the time, Jews are inhabited by unmarried men, but sometimes those who are married also pay a visit or even stay there.

Every village in Asmat has one Jew that is built near to a river. A Jew is usually 10 x 80 meter wide and designed rectangularly. The roof is made of nipa palm

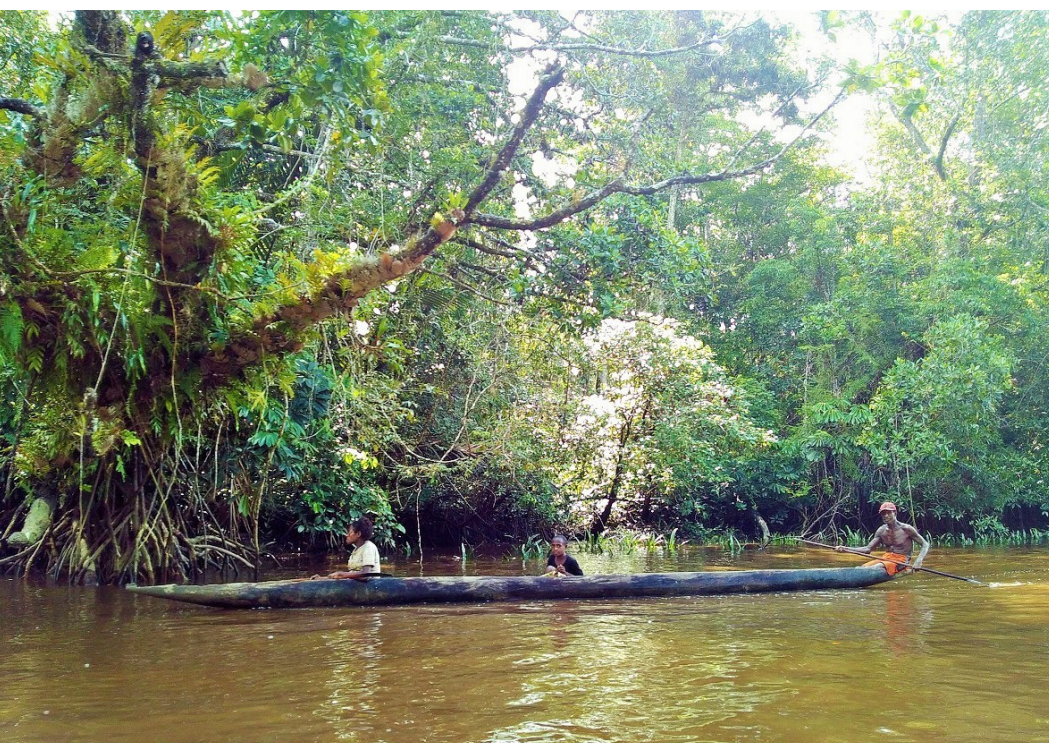


Photo:
Both forest and tradition plays an integral part in the daily lives of the Asmat tribe.

Photo:
Wood carving at Jew, an Asmat traditional house or art gallery as part of the daily routine for most Asmat men.



tree leaves and sago tree leaves. Its wall is a woven that is built from sago tree leaves. For the foundation, the Asmat uses ironwoods due to its strength, durability and water resistant characteristic making it suitable for peatland and coastal areas.

"The presence of jews indicate a well-preserved cultural heritage," said Felix Owom, the village head and traditional leader of Syuru Village. Jew is also where village leaders and the elders gather, hold a discussion or a traditional festival, welcome guests, arrange war strategy or meet to resolve conflicts.

In Jews, there are wood stoves whose number is exactly the same as the number of households in the village. Assuming that there are ten families in a village, there will be ten stoves in the Jew. Families will sit and gather near to the previously-assigned stoves during a public meeting.

Each village has a unique ritual in the process of building their Jews. The ritual depends on their beliefs and wood availability in the forest. In Yepem Village, for example, their tradition requires specific materials for the construction of the Jew: mangrove tree, weeping paperbark and pit wood. The pit wood has a large diameter and is very suitable to be used as pillars. The woods of mangrove trees are used for its building frame, including the floor and the roof.

To strengthen the structure, weeping paperbark wood is used as the middle frame of the building. All woods are tied together with rattan rope. Indeed, the Asmat's skill in building structures are extraordinary. Their unbelievable skill is passed down from generation to generation. Their technique is clever that their houses can stand firmly against storms and even earthquakes.

Jew's floor is made of paperbark tree skin. The purpose is to use whatever nature has to offer. Sago

tree leaves or usually called rubia leaves are used for its roof. The overall process of constructing one Jew can take up two months.

Once the Jew is successfully built, a sacred inauguration ceremony will be held and will be attended by all the villagers as well as their relatives and acquaintances from outside the village. The inauguration ceremony commences with a traditional leader ascending into the building and asking for the ancestor's approval through a series of prayer in a form of a chanted incantations. Afterwards this is followed by Pesta Goyang, a dancing ritual accompanied by the sound of Tifa (a traditional music instrument) which is initiated by all the woman present in this event. All men will then join the dance which indicate the peak of the ceremony. Sago worms are then served as a complimentary dish to all guests before the end of the party.

Jew is a cultural heritage of the Asmat that is still well-preserved until now. Asmat Regency was inscribed as a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO in 2011. This recognition attracts the world's attention to Asmat Tribe and its sophisticated carvings. Their carvings are considered to possess high intellectual and artistic values. Asmat wood workers hope their culture will remain well-known without having to lose their local values. *"Our biggest hope is that Asmat will be known by the world without having to lose our local identity,"* said Paskalis.

To preserve their cultural heritage, village leaders and the elders are trying to educate the younger generations better. They continue to teach sculpture and stories and local wisdoms about human-nature interaction to their children. They hope that forest will remain intact. They are aware that the destruction of forest means the end for their traditional sculpture.