CONNECTED AND DISCONNECTED: THE SKULL ART OF THE BISMAM OF WEST PAPUA

By

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother for her love, advice and financial support.
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The Bismam people of West Papua, before conversion to Christianity and colonization, practiced rituals that involved headhunting and cannibalism motivated by the belief that powerful lifeforces were contained in the human skull. This belief was also the impetus behind the retention of a deceased family member’s skull. The Bismam used cranial remains of enemies and relatives to create visual assemblages that suggested to the viewer several symbolic connections to Bismam cosmology.

In this thesis, I examine secondary source material from missionaries, colonizers and scholars to explore the history, environment, terminology, lifestyle, social organization, political structure, and religious beliefs of the Bismam. I analyze the adornment of the living and compare it to the adornment of the skulls. I examined the methods for acquiring skulls and the rituals that require skulls.
The Bismam created the ancestor skull from the remains of a deceased relative who died of natural causes. The skull was adorned with materials that created an individualized portrait of the deceased, an image of the ideal headhunter, and also represented an ancestral spirit. This assemblage was then worn by a living relative of the deceased. This visual display also protected the living relative from spiritual enemies and allowed the living to communicate easily with the dead.

The Bismam created the trophy skull from the remains of an enemy who was ritually killed; then arranged them to create three complex visual statements. Trophy skulls were suspended from the *bis* pole visually suggesting a fruit form while asserting the power of the headhunter. This arrangement was also a statement to the ancestors that their deaths were avenged, and it was a public declaration that balance had been restored. A young man displayed the adorned trophy skull during several stages of the initiation ritual visually connecting himself to the former living victim serving to transfer the lifeforces of the victim within the skull to the initiate. The last configuration of trophy skulls was purposely arranged in a vertical cluster resembling fruit. This visual statement was publicly displayed to emphasize the power and prestige of a high status headhunter, his family, his men’s house and his community.

Skull assemblages were complex art forms used in a variety of contexts that served to visually connect the Bismam viewer to symbolically rich ideas of their cosmology.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine the decoration and display of ancestor skulls and trophy skulls created by the Bismam people, a sub-group of the Asmat people, who live in the swampy delta of the south coast of West Papua, a province of Indonesia located on the island of New Guinea (Figure 1). An ancestor skull is the preserved cranial remains of a family member, and a trophy skull is the preserved cranial remains of an enemy. Both types of skulls are adorned with a variety of materials creating an assemblage that suggests a portrait of the deceased, as seen in the ancestor skull illustrated in Figure 2. To suggest the likeness of the family member, the mandible is securely attached, maintaining the original structure of the face. The eye sockets and nose cavity are filled with resin and colorful seeds. A headdress is loosely fitted on the skull, which is a similar in form to the headdress worn by the living. It is constructed from fiber netting allowing seeds and the feathers to be attached. Ornaments such as a nose piece and earring forms may be added to the skull to increase the viewer’s identification of a portrait as one can see in Figure 2.

The two types of skulls are displayed in different configurations. An assemblage of trophy skulls without decorations, known as a kus fe (Figure 3), is purposely arranged to create a form that has symbolic associations of fruit, power, and prestige for the Bismam viewer.

This assemblage was intentionally displayed in a private home for viewing by the family, the community, and the spirits. It was also intentionally displayed in a more public structure with a wider audience.
This paper will suggest that the many skull assemblages created by the Bismam were complex visual forms that embodied several aspects of their cosmology and as visual forms communicated these ideas to those who saw them.

Manipulated and displayed skull art has only been mentioned but not discussed in the scholarship on the Bismam. Two authors who noted the use of skulls by the Bismam were both missionaries, Father Gerard A. Zegwaard and Bishop Alphonse A. Sowada. Father Zegwaard gave the first detailed account of the Bismam when he settled among them in 1952 (Zegwaard 1959, 1020). By the time he had arrived, the Bismam had been exposed to traders from Malaysia and Australia. The Dutch administration had attempted to explore the region and pacify the people, and missionaries had begun to introduce Christianity. Japanese and Australian forces had been engaged in the battles of WWII in the region. As a missionary and anthropologist, Zegwaard documented cultural practices such as headhunting, cannibalism, initiation rites, and ancestor beliefs that were on the verge of change or had recently changed in his watershed essay titled “Headhunting Practices of the Asmat of Netherlands New Guinea.” In this description, he mentioned the use of trophy skulls in the initiation ritual of young men, as part of the kus fe assemblage, and placed in the forest to stimulate the growth of plants. Zegwaard also included a brief note concerning remains of a family member when he stated, “…keeping the bones and skulls of the deceased is another effective way of keeping the spirits at bay…” but he did not elaborate (1040).

In 1961, Father (later Bishop) Sowada followed Zegwaard’s example and traveled to the Bismam region to begin his service with the Crosier Mission. In an article for the National Geographic, he recorded his thoughts upon docking in this region:
Inland, not far beyond those trees, I knew men lived who had taken the heads of their enemies in battle or in ambush, eaten their flesh, and then use their skulls as pillows. These same people had a deep and obsessive fear of their ancestors’ spirits and wore some part of a forebear’s skeleton to ward off his ghost—a skull as a huge pendant, a vertebra on a necklace, or some other bone as a nose ornament. (Sowada 1968, 186)

Like Zegwaard, Sowada noted the presence of skulls among the Bismam. However, he recorded that trophy skulls were used “as pillows” and stated that an ancestor skull was worn “as a huge pendant.” Both missionaries suggested that ancestor skulls had a protective function, “keeping the spirits at bay,” or “to ward off his ghost.”

These two brief descriptions illustrate the scanty type of documentation on which this paper is based; therefore, additional related facets of material culture such as body decoration, sculpture, and masquerade, will be examined to gain an understanding of the adornment, function, and meaning of these objects. Aspects of mythology, religion, and cultural practices will also be reviewed when relevant. The focus of this paper is skull art created at the same time period before the 1950s that headhunting and cannibalism were practiced. The scholarship on the Bismam begins after these practices have ceased; however, many scholars have noted the continuity in culture, beliefs and art forms. I rely upon this continuity to suggest relationships to the skull art of the past.

The second chapter will provide preliminary material that allows the reader to form a context in which these objects can be discussed. To begin, this section will briefly review the history of contact with special attention to the missionaries, collectors and anthropologists who provide relevant material from which this paper is drawn. The methodology employed for this paper is an analysis of secondary source material gathered by missionaries such as Zegwaard and Sowada, explorers, collectors and
anthropologists. I have not attempted to corroborate these assumptions with the members of the Bismam culture.

The second chapter will also determine the appropriate term to describe the people discussed in this paper. After reviewing the art styles used to distinguish regional variations among the Asmat people, I have chosen to limit the focus of this paper to one regional area, the Central Asmat. Then, I will discuss one definition of the word Bismam as carver of *bis*, a memorial sculpture. I will also examine the other definition of the word Bismam as speakers of the Bismam sub-dialect of the Asmat language. These factors contribute to the proposal and use of the name Bismam to describe the people at the focus of this paper.

The second chapter will also provide background information on seemingly unrelated topics that have an influence on Bismam life and thus the construction of skull art. To begin, a brief survey of the natural environment of the Bismam will be made. Next, I will examine the men’s house as a social organization as a factor in the lives of the Bismam. In Melanesian societies, the bigman is a man of political power that is earned rather than inherited. I consider the role of the bigman as political leader in the Bismam community. Finally, the second chapter concludes with a review of a few ideas central to Bismam beliefs that have an impact on the construction of skull art. The reader will be introduced to two myths, one that explains the origin of the Bismam and one that explains the origin of the sago palm. In addition, a metaphorical relationship between humans and trees will be discussed. Finally, the journey an ancestral spirit is believed to make will be explored.
This third chapter examines the production, adornment and function of the ancestor skull in Bismam society. The analysis begins by examining the personal adornment of the living, including fiber ornaments, necklaces, nose ornaments, earrings, headdresses, and body paint. The assessment of the living’s adornment will conclude with a discussion of functional objects such as a carrying bag, ceremonial paddle, and ancestor skull that signify the status of an individual. The next section will review the funeral rites that occurred when someone died of natural causes and the treatment of the corpse as these practices relate to the preparation of the ancestor skull. Then, a formal analysis will be made of adorned ancestor skulls, and this adornment will be compared to the adornment of the living.

The third chapter continues with a discussion of the function of the ancestor skull as protective device. The reader will be introduced to the spirits and lifeforces that are believed to affect the Bismam sometimes maliciously. The protective function of wooden decorated shields, objects traditionally used in warfare, will be examined to suggest that the ancestor skull has a similar protective function. Certain designs such as ancestor figures and bipane nose ornaments carved into the shield enhance its power. This decoration will be compared to the use of a bipane nose ornament for adorning the ancestor skull suggesting that a similar power is expressed in this visual element.

Finally, the third chapter will suggest that the ancestor skull also functions as a tool to maintain contact with the ancestor realm. To understand this function, the reader will be introduced to a few Bismam myths about communicating with the dead. The jipae mask is a physical embodiment of the ancestor spirit and will be compared to the ancestor skull to suggest that these objects have a similar communicative function. The jipae mask
and the ancestor skull share a few elements of adornment that suggest a pattern is used to depict an ancestral spirit.

The fourth chapter will look at the method of acquiring the trophy skull, displaying the trophy skull, and interpreting the symbolism connected with each display. The first configuration of trophy skulls that this chapter will discuss involves the *bis* pole, a wooden sculpture carved to memorialize deceased relatives. During the *bis* ritual enemies’ skulls were hung from the projecting element of the pole. This display of skull on the poles stated that revenge had been exacted. This section will also address how revenge was achieved and describe the *bis* pole, its preparation and the *bis* ritual.

Then, I will study the initiation ritual and the use of the adorned trophy skull to facilitate growth in a male child by associating the adornment of the skull with the adornment of the young boy. The adorned trophy skull and the adorned child were also displayed throughout the initiation ritual, suggesting to the group gathered to witness the ritual a connection between the boy and the deceased individual.

Finally, I will study the assemblage of trophy skulls in a *kus fe* configuration. This configuration makes several visual statements. It expresses the relationship of humans to trees, the power of the headhunter, and the prestige of the bigman. The assemblage is also displayed in the men’s house and the family home so that the visual statements that are embody by the *kus fe* are seen by a public audience and a private audience.

The fifth chapter will provide a comparison of the ancestor skull’s adornment, display, and function to the trophy skull’s adornment, display, and function exploring the complex visual statements that these objects convey about relationships between the living who use the skull and the dead represented by the skull.
CHAPTER 2
CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

This chapter reviews different aspects of contextual information concerning the Bismam. The first section highlights a few historical contacts in which explorers, Dutch colonizers, missionaries, Indonesian colonizers, and scholars come into the region. These various outsiders have either had an impact on traditional Bismam culture or have documented the impact of others on traditional culture. The Dutch administration and missionaries were able to curtail headhunting and cannibalism while the military presence of the Indonesian rule stopped any lingering headhunting and cannibalism (Schneebaum 1990, 60). By the end of the twentieth century, Christianity had been accepted by the Asmat (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 80). The rituals that demanded decorated and displayed skulls have ceased or have been dramatically altered. The scholars who first entered the Asmat region approached these practices as events in the recent past that nonetheless still affected daily life. The period of colonization that connects the end of headhunting to contemporary life can still be considered a time of transition. A review of the time periods when scholars were researching allows the reader to gauge at what point in this transition specific scholars were working.

The second section examines the use of the terms Asmat and Bismam to describe the people who are the focus of this paper. In order to assess which name is more applicable, I will determine the region of skull art, the region in which bis poles, and the region of speakers of the Bismam sub-dialect of the Asmat language. Finally, I will propose the term Bismam to define the people discussed in this paper.
The final section of this chapter reviews several different aspects of Bismam life. The elements of the natural environment are listed. A brief review is made of the men’s house as a social institution and the bigman as a political leader. Finally, a few aspects of Bismam religious ideas will be noted. All of these aspects of Bismam culture bear on the function of skull construction.

**History of Contact**

This section briefly reviews a history of contact between the Bismam people and outsiders. This section provides a few notes on history, colonization and researchers while giving a review of the scholarship on the Bismam, especially the sources used for the construction of this text. To act as a historical outline, this section is divided into early exploration, contact and later contact.

**Early Exploration**

The first Europeans to document seeing New Guinea were the Portuguese in 1512 (D’Alleva 1998, 32). The Portuguese Governor of the Moluccas, Jorge de Meneses, was the first to land on the island, which he named “island of the Papuans” (32). Yet, the Spanish were the first Europeans to claim New Guinea as their property in the 1545 (Wassing 1993, 27). Captain Yñigo Ortiz de Retes named the island, New Guinea, suggesting the familiar African Guinea Coast (Trenkenschuh 1982, 2: 25). The Spanish were not very interested in colonizing the island; however, the Dutch were (Wassing 1993, 27).

The Dutch captain, Jan Carstensz gave one of the first accounts of the Asmat, in 1623, when he briefly noted, “… a people with pierced nostrils and a curling gourd or a snail-shell on their penis” (Schneebaum 1990, 17). He observed the Casuarina trees from which this coastline would later take its name (Amelsvoort 1964, 57). He also described
the snow on large mountain peaks as he sailed past the coast on his journey to search for exploitable resources (Beaglehole 1966, 117). The mountains became known as the Snow Mountains. Now, they are known as the Jayakesuma Mountains (Schneebaum 1990, 17).

In 1770, the English captain James Cook stopped at what is now Cook’s Bay in the Asmat region (17). He was on a journey to observe the transit of Venus across the sun, search for the theoretical southern continent, and look for any undiscovered land that would be of interest to empire-building England (Beaglehole 1966, 231-237). As he passed New Guinea, the crew was in need of fresh water and Cook recorded this encounter:

I went a shore in the Pinnace accompanied by Mr. Banks and Dr. Solander... but had not gone above 200 Yards before we were attacked by 3 or 4 Men who came out of the woods a little before us, but upon innmediately firing upon them they retired; finding that we could not search the Country with any degree of safety we returned to the boat and was follow’d by 60 or as some thought about 100 of the natives who had advance’d in small parties out of the woods. (Schneebaum 1990, 17)

He also reported that the locals pursued the crew throwing lime dust (Amelsvoort 1964, 57). Lime dust was made from burnt and pulverized shells (Schneebaum 1990, 33). According to Eyde, “Lime is associated with a female element in the universe which makes men “hot”, that is, brave and aggressive, so that throwing lime is really another way of calling the enemy female” (Eyde 1967, 71). This was the first time Europeans had landed in Asmat territory. The next attempted landing over fifty years later, in 1826, was very similar, including the insult of lime dust, when the Dutch Captain Kolff sailed into Cook’s Bay (Schneebaum 1990, 17).

The Dutch East India Company, attempting to safeguard their trade routes to the Spice Islands, was the motivating force behind the Dutch government’s interest in New Guinea (Wassing 1993, 27). In 1828, the Netherlands solidified their claim to this
western half of the island with a new treaty and a proclamation of sovereignty over New Guinea west of the 141st degree east longitude line (Knauft 1993, 33).

Toward the end of the 19th century, missionaries began to move to New Guinea (Trenkenschuh 1982, 2: 25). The Dutch government was not interested in contact with the indigenous people, but, with the urging of missionaries, the first administrative post was established in 1898 in the northwest region (Knauft 1993, 33). The urging of the British government led to the establishment of the second Dutch administrative post, on the south coast of New Guinea, to pacify the Marind-anim people who were headhunting in British territory (Wassing 1993, 27).

Between 1903 and 1917 this post in Merauke also became a launching point for interior exploration (28). Explorers ventured into Asmat territory in an attempt to reach the snowcapped peaks of the Jayakesuma Mountains, which Cartensz had first described (28). The explorations were conducted as military, geographic and scientific studies and signaled the beginning of many collections of Asmat objects, including those of Von Siebold, Lorentz, and Gooszen (Lamme 1993, 137).

The Dutch were seeking exploitable resources such as minerals from the mountains (Zubricich 1997, 288). From this period, J.H.Hondius van Herwerden recorded an interesting description of the Asmat.

Up till now they lived in the stone, bone and shell age. That it is possible to achieve fine results [in woodcarving] without iron utensils is demonstrated by the open work lances present in the Van Herwerden collection. Most curious of all are perhaps the ornamented bamboo tubes used as shell-trumpets for blowing far reaching audible signals…. More unmanageable material than the smooth bamboo surface to be worked up with flint stone, shell or boar’s tusk does not exist. (Wassing 1993, 28)

This is an early example of the interest many have taken in Asmat woodcarving.

The intricately carved bamboo horn was used in battle to disorient and scare the enemy
and for signaling after success in battle (Figure 4) (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 177).

During this period of early exploration Major A.J. Gooszen, who served in the Dutch Indies army, gathered over nine hundred Asmat objects, which he gave to the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden (Lamme 1993, 144). In total, he collected over six thousand objects from Southwest New Guinea (144). Objects collected at this time had little or no documentation, and the Asmat were not yet distinguished as a group in collection records (Gerbrands 1967, 20). Notably, in 1922, Paul Wirz, who was gathering objects from many areas of west New Guinea, acquired a bis pole with skulls attached (Figure 5) (Schneebaum 1990, 17).

Northwest of the Asmat, the Dutch government set up a post in 1925 among the Mimika (Wassing 1993, 28). The Mimika, also known as the Kamoro, have a few similarities with the Asmat such as language, diet, and large memorial sculpture (Trenkenschuh 1982, 1:77). The Mimikas knew the Asmat as we mana we or “men who eat men” (Wassing 1993, 28).

**Contact and the Dutch Administration**

In 1939, along the Asewets River close to Flamingo bay, the Dutch government established the first government post in the Asmat region at the village of Agats, but it was abandoned with the outbreak of World War II (28).

During the war, the Japanese controlled the Asmat region. As the war ended, headhunting seemed to increase and scholars have speculated this was due to the drastic changes brought on by the war (29). Over 6,000 Central Asmat fled to Mimika territory to escape the intensified headhunting between 1946 and 1948 (29). At this point,
missionaries, especially Father Zegwaard, began to learn the Asmat language and customs (29).

By 1949, the Asmat were persuaded to return to their old villages (29). Father Zegwaard oversaw all mission activities among the Asmat and in 1952 moved to Agats (29). Serious scholarship on the Asmat began with Zegwaard’s article “The Headhunting Practices of the Asmat Netherlands New Guinea” published in 1959.

The Dutch government, along with missionaries, introduced aspects of Western culture to the Asmat and attempted to stop headhunting (30). Institutions such as churches, clinics and schools were opened (30). Farming, animal husbandry and logging stimulated the economy (30). Logging, in particular, drastically affected hereditary land ownership in Asmat because the government has a policy of taking the land it deemed necessary for commerce (Zubrinich 1997, 298). For example, Agats was developed to house the Dutch administration (Trenkenschuh 1982, 2:28).

The period from 1954 to 1963 saw a number of missionaries, collectors and anthropologists come to work in the region and document many aspects of Asmat culture (Wassing 1993, 30). Vincent Van Amelsvoort was the Dutch medical officer from 1961 to 1964 and wrote *Culture, Stone Age and Modern Medicine* (Gerbrands 1967, 8). In 1961, Father Alphonse A. Sowada, who trained as an anthropologist writing his thesis titled, “Socio-Economic Survey of the Asmat Peoples of Southwestern New Guinea,” came to the region with the Crosier Mission (Sowada 1968, 192). He and Father Frank A. Trenkenschuh, began a collection of information on the Asmat known as *The Asmat Sketch Book* based on their notes, articles by other visitors, and notes gathered by Father Zegwaard (Trenkenschuh 1982, 1:3). Originally, the material was to provide a resource
for incoming missionaries to learn about the Asmat, their customs, and the mission, but it became a tool for incoming scholars as well, who later published in the Sketch Book (3). This collection was first published in 1970 as two volumes; however, by the last year it was published, in 1982, it had grown to eight volumes. While continuously contributing to the Sketch Book, Sowada has also written many articles on the Asmat people published in other venues. From 1959 to 1960, Carleton Gajdusek was in the region to conduct genetic research (Gajdusek 1990, 76). He collected over one thousand objects that are now housed in the Peabody Museum of Salem, Massachusetts (76).

1960 through 1962 was a very interesting time for research in Asmat because several scholars came to the region. The Dutch anthropologist Adrian A. Gerbrands arrived in Amanamkai at the end of 1960 to study ethno-aesthetics and to collect for the Rijkmuseum in Leiden (Gerbrands 1967, 7-9). He studied Asmat woodcarvers and their uniqueness of style within the framework of traditional forms. He collected almost six hundred objects for the museum (Lamme 1993, 147). Gerbrands wrote Wow-Ipits: Eight Asmat woodcarvers of New Guinea, filmed a documentary on woodcarving, and edited Michael Rockefeller’s journal for publication.

At the same time as Gerbrands, David Eyde, an anthropologist from Yale University, settled in Amanamkai (Wassing 1993, 30). He studied the relationship between economy welfare and warfare patterns for his dissertation, Cultural Correlates of Warfare among the Asmat of South-West New Guinea. Also at this fruitful time, C.L. Voorhoeve studied linguistics for two years in the same village (Gerbrands 1967, 9). His work, The Flamingo Bay Dialect of the Asmat Language, added to the work of Father P.
Drabbe who had first documented many of the different dialects of the area (Zubrinich 1997, 67).

Michael Rockefeller, a photographer for the Harvard-Peabody expedition studying the highlands of New Guinea, came to the Asmat region in 1961, surveying the possibilities of collecting in the area (Rockefeller 1967, 5). He returned later in the year to collect for the Museum of Primitive Art in New York, where he was a trustee (5). After his death, his journal and photographs were edited for publication in *The Asmat of New Guinea: The Journal of Michael Clark Rockefeller* (5). Rene Wassing, an anthropologist working for the Dutch’s Bureau of Native Affairs, helped Rockefeller to collect (Zubrinich 1997, 70). Wassing was the curator of the Department of Oceania at the Rotterdam Museum.

**Later Contact and the Indonesian Administration**

In 1962, the Dutch government ended its colonial rule of western New Guinea, and in 1963, the Indonesian government began its colonial rule (Wassing 1993, 31). As Kerry Zubrinich, points out “The succession of names given to the western half of the island of New Guinea reflects its continuing political engagement with colonization” (Zubrinich 1997, 30). When the Dutch were claiming the area, names such as Dutch New Guinea or Netherlands New Guinea were applicable (30). The Indonesians renamed the area Irian Barat, then Irian Jaya (30).

The Indonesian government banned all feasts and ceremonies as well as anything that could be construed as part of the headhunting cycle, including dancing, drumming and carving (Wassing 1993, 31). They also destroyed the communal men’s houses (31). They, like the Dutch government before them, extracted resources from the land such as oil, minerals and timber, and when possible, used Asmat labor mostly for the logging
industry (Zubrinich 1997, 311). This introduced the Asmat to the concept of a cash economy (105). The Crosier mission was able to negotiate with the Indonesia government to retract the ban, and some traditional activities began again, attracting art collectors back to the area (O’Neill 1996, 24). The Crosier mission also helped to preserve some aspects of traditional culture by adopting them and including them in their church ceremonies (24).

With the help of the United Nations, J. Hoogerbrugge began the Asmat Art project to encourage woodcarvers who had stopped sculpting to make their traditional carvings again (Schneebaum 1990, 15). By 1970, Asmat woodcarving reemerged, and the momentum generated by this resurgence led the newly installed Bishop Sowada and the Crosier mission to the establishment of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress in Agats (Wassing 1993, 31). The major goal of the museum was to preserve the art for the Asmat people (Schneebaum 1990, 19). Tobias Schneebaum, an anthropologist and artist, began the process of researching, exhibiting, and cataloging the growing collection (Smidt 1993, xii). His work for the museum was titled Asmat Images: From the collection of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress. Later, he assembled an exhibition with Gajdusek’s collection from the Peabody Museum titled Embodied Spirits: Ritual Carvings of the Asmat for which Gajdusek, Sowada and Zegwaard contributed articles (Schneebaum 1990, viii).

Another contributor to the Asmat Sketch Book was Peter Van Arsdale who did anthropological research, in 1973 and 1974, investigating the economic changes among the central Asmat titled Perspectives on Development in Asmat (Zubrinich 1997, 70). His wife, Kathleen Van Arsdale, also an anthropologist, wrote “Music and Culture of the
Bismam Asmat of New Guinea: A Preliminary Investigation.” She was in the Asmat area in 1979 (Arsdale, K. 1982, 17). Abraham Kuruwaip, who later became director of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress, studied the bis pole, in 1973, and wrote an article titled “The Asmat Bis Pole: Its Background and Meaning,” also published in the Asmat Sketch Book (Kuruwaip 1978, 11). Robert Mitton made several journeys into New Guinea while working for mining companies between 1971 and 1973 (Mitton 1983, 160). He was an amateur anthropologist, and his journal notes are published in The Lost World of Irian Jaya (160).

Also in the 1970s, Gunter and Ursula Konrad began an eleven month zoological research project in the Asmat area (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 13). They gathered cultural material from all over the Asmat region, especially the undocumented Brazza River area (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 10). They have continued to return to the region over twenty-five years adding to their substantial collection of objects, which has been documented in several books and catalogs including: Asmat Life with the Ancestors: Stone Age Woodcarvers in our Time, Asmat Myth and Ritual: The Inspiration of Art, and Asmat: Mythos und Kunst im Leben mit den Ahnen (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 15-17). In addition to writing for their own publications, the Konrads contributed articles to the Asmat Sketch Book.

After the seventies, the Indonesian government limited entry into the area by tourists and art collectors (Zubrinich 1997, 71). Except for the publications by the Konrads, very little new field research has been done on the Asmat since the 1970s (71). By the late 1990s, Thomas O’Neil visited the Asmat area while on assignment for the National Geographic Society. He reported that the Sunday church service he attended in
the village of Komor in the Northwest region of Asmat took place in the men’s long house (O’Neill 1996, 26). He also said that the people wore body paint, headbands and feathers (26). The services included drumming, dancing and sharing roasted sago (26). This example demonstrates the combination of old and new practices that characterize the contemporary Asmat situation.

By 2002, the political policy of Indonesia had changed to allow some autonomy in the province of Irian Jaya and the name was changed to West Papua to reflect the indigenous people’s preference (news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asicsapacific/1739233.stm Last accessed December 31 2004).

**Asmat or Bismam?**

The Asmat people use the term Asmat to describe themselves (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 303). The dramatic *bis* poles collected by Michael Rockefeller have become synonymous with all Asmat people even though only a distinct group of Asmat people, known as Bismam, carve these sculpture (303). The information contained in Zegwaard’s “The Headhunting Practices of the Asmat Netherlands New Guinea” (1959) has become the standard by which all Asmat people are described (303). Yet, Zegwaard clearly stated that the information he gathered reflected only one village, Sjuru (Zegwaard 1959, 1020). He used the term Bismam to describe the people of Sjuru and the surrounding villages (1034).

Zegwaard mentioned two manifestations of the trophy skull: adorned in initiation rituals and hung in a *kus fe*. He briefly noted the use of ancestor skulls. He described art forms such as the men’s house, personal adornment, *bis* poles and the *jipae* masquerade. In another essay, “De Sociale Structuur van de Asmatbevolking,” co-written by Zegwaard and J. Boelaars, they discuss the *bis* ceremony, the initiation ritual, a leader’s
funeral, and the ancestor skull. This article was also focused on the village of Sjuru. All of the topics discussed in these two publications will be pertinent to the analysis of ancestor and trophy skulls in this paper.

The problem of which term best reflects the people to be discussed, the more general “Asmat” or the very specific “Bismam” is important. This section of the paper will provide an examination of three factors: art areas, bis pole production, and language, to determine the more applicable term.

Asmat Art Areas

In 1976, A.J.J.M. Boeren studied a group of Asmat shields housed in the Rijksmuseum Voor Volkenkunde in Leiden and was able to distinguish two artistic style regions, the Northwest and Central (Smidt 1993, 53). Other scholars such as Gerbrands, the Konrads, Schneebaum, and Smidt enhanced and extended these styles. The accepted stylistic divisions of the Asmat region and their letters are as follows: A. Central Asmat, B. Northwest Asmat, C. Eastern Asmat or the Citak, D. Northeast Asmat or the Brazza River (Figure 1) (Schneebaum 1985, 47).

In Central area, shields are rectangular with large low-relief designs often with a figural element at the top (Figure 6), while in the Northwest region, shields are oval with smaller and more plentiful low-relief designs (Figure 7) (Smidt 1993, 56-57). Shields from the Citak region and the Brazza River area have oval shapes with a flat bottom. Citak shields also have large low-relief designs (Figure 8) (56-57). Brazza River shields have a distinctive division of the surface area of the shield into head, body and feet (Figure 9) (56-57).

The Konrads, through extensive collecting in the area, have determined twelve groups of Asmat people based on the type of art objects they make and their cultural
practices (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 316-317). While this designation will certainly prove valuable to better understand Asmat art and culture, the focus of this paper is ancestor skulls and trophy skulls, which were not used as a classification criteria in creating these categories.

Some objects such as shields are found throughout the entire Asmat region but, as described above, had regional variations (Schneebaum 1985, 47). As a necessary mode of transportation, canoes are found throughout the region (Figure 10) (47). Also weapons such as spears and bows and arrows exist in all four areas. Drums are another type of carving found throughout the region (Figure 11) (47).

Because the literature on the Asmat only contains a few references to ancestor skulls and trophy skulls, this paper depends on descriptions of other objects to draw comparisons and make conclusions about the skulls. Shields will be used to discuss the protective function of skulls, and shields occur in all Asmat regions. However, some objects are only found in certain areas. Bis poles, elaborate canoe prows, bamboo horns with intricate low-relief carvings, carved bowls and carved paddles are only produced in the Central region and the Northwest region (Schneebaum 1985, 47). The bis pole, because it becomes part of a trophy skull assemblage, will be use to examine the symbolism of trophy skulls (Figure 5). The way carved paddles are carried will be used for comparison to ancestor skulls (Figure 12). The jipae mask will be used to discuss ancestor skulls, and it occurs in the Central area and the Northwest area (Figure 13).

Most importantly for this paper, Schneebaum reports that Central Asmat had ancestor skulls and trophy skulls (146-147). The Citak area did not have ancestor or trophy skulls while the Brazza River area had only trophy skulls (146-147). Schneebaum
does not report on whether the Northwest area had ancestor skulls or trophy skulls. However, Rockefeller collected trophy skulls from the villages of Momogo and Jipajer in the Northwestern area (Rockefeller 1967, 332).

The Central region contains ancestor skulls, trophy skulls, shields, *jipae* masks, carved paddles, and *bis* poles; therefore, the focus of this paper will be on the region designated as Asmat style area A.

**Bis Pole Production**

To further refine the focus of this paper, this section will review the villages that produce *bis* poles. The word *bis* means spirit and the carving that contained the spirit (Kuruwaip 1978, 14). The word *mam* means to carve or create; therefore, Bismam are people who carve *bis* (14).

Father Zegwaard noted the people of Sjuru village carved ancestor poles (Zegwaard 1959, 1028). In the 1960s Gerbrands, Eyde, Rockefeller and Wassing were in the village of Amanamkai, where they found *bis* carvers as well. Schneebaum and the Konrads were in the area in the 1970s. They state,

…from the village of Ewer in Flamingo Bay in Central Asmat to Ajam, [Ayam] Warse, Amborep, Atsj and Amanamkai, down through Otsjanep, was the scene of the great ancestor poles, the mbis [bis], for which Asmat has become famous. Recent outside influence has given villages like Buepis far to the south and Japtambor the impetus to celebrate this feast for the first time and the village of Bajun has even gone so far as to import carvers from Pirien to help. (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 40)

Abraham Kuruwaip was also in the area in the 1970s and identified Bismam villages as Ewer, Sjuru, Yepem, Per, Owus, Biwar-Laut, Atsj, Amanamkai, Jow, Ambisu, Omandesep and Otsjanep (Kuruwaip 1978, 14). Kuruwaip noticed the spread of *bis* pole production and theorized that successful headhunting raids allowed the Bismam people to increase their territorial range (14). He also pointed out that because of the natural
resources available in the Central area, other groups from the interior may have passed through the Bismam region, thus exposing them to the *bis* ritual and *bis* carving (14). Thus, the ritual had spread to the villages of Jaosakar, Kaimo, Awok, Fos and Warkai (14). However, Kuruwaip has stated, “… this diffusion process still requires further research” (14). All of the preceding villages, who are *bis* carvers, mentioned in this section fall into the Central Asmat art style region (area A) (Figure 1).

**Asmat Language**

The term Bismam is also defined as a sub-dialect of the Kawanak dialect of the Asmat language. To understand this usage of the term Bismam, it is necessary to review the classification of the Asmat language.

To begin, the most basic language classifications of New Guinea are the Austronesian languages and the Papuan languages (Bodley 1994, 134). Papuan speakers are descendants of the first peoples to settle Australia, Tasmania, New Guinea, and the rest of Melanesia after 60,000 BC (135). The Austronesian language family developed from the peoples who settled in the northwestern region and along the entire north coast of New Guinea after 5000 BC (135). Ancestral speakers of this language family were expert maritime navigators from Southeast Asia whose descendants went on to settle throughout Micronesia, Melanesia and the western edge of Polynesia and became known as the Proto-Polynesians (135).

Of the one thousand languages of New Guinea, seven hundred are Papuan (Arsdale, P. 1978, 16). Asmat-Sempan-Kamoro is one language family of the Papuan languages (16). This language family is made up of the Sempan-Kamoro, which is spoken by the Mimika, and the Asmat language (16). Father P. Drabbe studied the Asmat
language and divided it into five major dialects: Kawenak, Keenok, Keenakap, Kaweinag, and Kaunak (Figure 14) (Eyde 1967, 3).

In addition to these major dialects, sub-dialects abound. The Kawenak dialect has four sub-dialects (4). One sub-dialect of Kawenak is Bismam (4). Father Drabbe noted that it was spoken in the villages of Ewer, Sjuru, Yepem, Per and Owus (4). In his usage, Bismam corresponded to the speakers of the same sub-dialect and not to the other definition of Bismam as carvers of *bis* poles. Scholars such as Zegwaard and the Van Arsdales worked with people who spoke the Bismam dialect. Peter Van Arsdale used the terminology Flamingo Bay dialect instead of Bismam dialect “…for the ease of geographic identification” (Arsdale, P. 1978, 18).

Another sub-dialect of Kawenak is Metsj-Mbip (Eyde 1967, 4). This is spoken in several villages including, Atsj, Atjametsj, Amanamkai, Ar-Danim, Bipim, Ambisu, Kawet, Tsjowew-Jamen, Omandesep, Otsjanep (4). Scholars such as Eyde, Gerbrands, and Rockefeller worked with people who spoke the Metsj-Mbip dialect. Two other sub-dialects, Simai and Kainak are found in the major Kawenak dialect (4).

Van Amelsvoort notes, “Beyond their own dialect boundaries people can understand the other dialects with some difficulty” (Amlesvoort 1964, 39). Thus, Kawenak, Keenok, Keenakap, Kaweinag, and Kaunak speakers can all understand each other with some difficulty. Speakers of the Kawenak sub-dialects, Bismam, Metsj-Mbip, Simai and Kainak, easily understand one another (Eyde 1967, 4).

Since different sub-dialect speakers easily understand one another and different dialect speakers understand each other with some difficulty, for the purposes of this paper, the overall language designation of Asmat will be sufficient.
**Bismam**

There are several choices for a term to designate the people discussed in this text. Asmat is the term used by the people themselves and is a common designation for most art objects from this region. Central Asmat is a regional name that reflects the classification of art style areas. “Asmat proper” was a general name used by Eyde following Van Amelswoort’s example and refers to the Kawenak, Keenakap and Keenok dialect speakers (5). Bismam Asmat was a term used by Peter Van Arsdale to designate the villages of Agats, Beriten, Per, Ewer, Sjuru, Owus and Yepem as “culturally and ecologically homogeneous” (Aresdale, P. 1978, 6). Bismam was a term first used by Father Zegwaard to describe the people of Sjuru village (Zegwaard 1959, 1035).

The ancestor skulls to be examined are from Central Asmat art style area. The trophy skulls and contextual material used for this analysis are also from the Central Asmat region, area A. All of the objects used for comparison to the skulls are from the Central Asmat region as well. *Bis* carvers and *bis* poles are found in the Central Asmat art region. Bismam refers to *bis* carvers and to speakers of a distinctive sub-dialect of the Kawenak dialect of the Asmat language. *Bis* carvers are found throughout the Central Asmat region. Bismam speakers are only found in five villages. For the purposes of this paper, the name Bismam will be used to refer to carvers of *bis* who live in the Central Asmat region and speak the Asmat language.

**Background**

The background information to be provided by this section, while seemingly disparate, provides a broad picture of the Bismam way of life and cosmology. This information will prepare the reader for the next two chapters. The first section reviews the geography, climate, flora and fauna of the region allowing the reader to understand
the environment of the Bismam, their lifestyle, and the resources available to them. The next section looks at two aspects of Bismam life, social organization and political organization. In the social arena, the men’s house is a focal point. In the political arena, the bigman is the most powerful leader. The last section of this chapter briefly surveys a few ideas central to Bismam cosmology. Although the wide acceptance of Christianity has altered some aspects of these concepts, they are still a part of Bismam life. The first idea to be explored is the Bismam myth of creation, which is the basis for the next idea, the Bismam metaphorical identification with trees. Finally, the last concept examined is the Bismam understanding of the cyclic migration of a spirit.

Natural Environment

Lying above Australia at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, New Guinea is the second largest island in the world. Being located just below the equator, it is part of the equatorial and subequatorial zones, yet it has glaciers among its mountain ranges (Ford 1973, 1). The mountain ranges, interspersed with volcanoes, extend east to west creating an undulating central ridge (3). Its highest peak Puncak Jaya, formerly known as Carstenz Toppen, named after explorer Jan Carstenz, is over 16,000 ft high (3). A multitude of rivers run off these mountains to the Arafura Sea below (Figure 15) (11). The Asmat region is part of a larger area of swampland that stretches across a good portion of the south coast of the island, from the Papuan Gulf to the northern reaches of Mimikan territory (11). This swampland is not a flooded region of land but rather a creation of the slow build up of alluvial deposits brought by the many rivers (Arsdale, P. 1978, 71). As a result, rock does not naturally occur (71). In fact, the Bismam have long traded for stone from groups in the foothills (71). This trade did not stop until the Bismam began trading with Europeans for metal tools (71).
In this tropical zone, temperatures range from seventy degrees at night to eighty-five degrees during the day (74). The extremely high humidity is around seventy percent annually (78). Incredibly, the average annual rainfall is over sixteen feet (Smidt 1993, 15). Although the temperature does not reflect seasonal change, two monsoon seasons occur in the region: the east monsoon, in July and August and the longer northwest monsoon from December to March (Arsdale, P 1978, 75). In addition to precipitation, the region is sandwiched between the aforementioned mountains, with annual flooding from snow melt, and the Arafura Sea, with daily inundation from the tide (Gerbrands 1967, 20). Because the whole region is at sea level, rivers rise and fall up to sixteen feet between high and low tides (Sowada 1961, 4). Tides affect the rivers as far as eighty miles inland (4). On the larger rivers a shift in the direction of the water occurs (Eyde 1967, 13).

An estuary habitat is created by the mixing of freshwater from the many rivers and saltwater from the influx of tides; thus, species common to either type of water are in close proximity to one another (Eyde 1967, 9). Mangroves dominate this habitat with trees ranging from fifty to one hundred feet high (Ford 1973, 27). The buttress root of the mangrove tree is used to make shields, and the whole tree is used to carve bis poles (Figure 16) (Eyde 1967, 12). Palm tree varieties such as the nibung, nipah, and pandanus are exploited as building material and as food (Eyde 1967, 26). Pandanus is used to make sleeping mats, rain capes, and carrying bags (27). Very thin strips of pandanus fronds are fashioned into string and then woven into string bags (27). The coconut palm is also used for food (Figure 17). The betel nut palm provides the mildly intoxicating nut that is chewed while the men converse and lounge in the men’s house (Sowada 1961, 61). Fruit
trees include wild varieties of banana, nutmeg, lemon, lime, orange, jack fruit, brush cherries, and sea almond (Figure 18 and Figure 19) (Eyde 1967, 12; Ford 1973, 27; Sowada 1961, 2; Ryan 1972, 228). Liana, lawyer vines and rattan wind through the various levels of vegetation creating a tangled mat (Sowada 1961, 2). Swamp grass, mosses and ferns precariously hang onto the mud (2). Orchids of many varieties abound in the forest (2).

The most important plant of the forest for the Asmat and many other swamp dwellers is the sago palm (Figure 20) (Ryan 1972, 232). There are two varieties, the thorny *metroxylon rumphii*, which is the most common in the Asmat region, and the smooth *metroxylon sago* (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 11). The latter is a large palm, over twenty-five feet high (Ryan 1972, 232). Although growing from seed is possible, the palms are plentiful in the wild, propagating from underground roots. Several immature plants create dense growing clumps (232). It takes about fifteen years for the sago to mature fully (232).

The starch contained in the pith of the sago is stored to provide food for the tree’s fruit, so the tree is harvested before it flowers (232). Although, it is not necessary to cultivate sago, the area around the palm is weeded, both helping the tree to survive and grow and signifying its ownership by those who weed (Eyde 1967, 29). Each family had its own territory in the forest for the production of sago (29). Ownership of the territory is passed down through the family (29). Men select the tree, chop it down and in the days of headhunting served as lookouts. Women do most of the pounding and processing of the pith into flour, which is rich in carbohydrates (28-31). Sago comprises perhaps ninety
percent of the diet (Schneebaum 1989, 51). Amos is the term for sago and is also the term for food in general (Eyde 1967, 28).

For the Bismam, ritual cycles begin with cutting ten to a hundred sago palms; holes are drilled into the bark to encourage the Capricorn beetle to lay its eggs (39). The beetle eggs mature into larvae in 30 to 40 days, which are collected and presented at many ceremonies where they were divided as gifts that help to solidify relationships (Figure 21) (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 94).

Sago flour is also an important ceremonial food (94). Giving sago flour, sharing a sago meal and rubbing sago on someone are all gestures of goodwill and friendship (Sowada 1961, 38). Furthermore, sago is identified with the ancestors; Sowada recorded a myth that “… relates how two ancestors, who were unable to obtain sago while living on this earth, changed themselves into sago trees so that future generations might not starve” (35). Although most of their food is gathered from the surrounding forest, the Bismam do cultivate crops such as yams, cassava, papaya, sugar cane, and taro (Figure 22) (Eyde 1967, 64).

New Guinea and Australia, in the ancient past were part of the same continent; therefore, they share a wide variety of marsupials with slight variations for each land mass (Ford 1973, 36). Four varieties of opossums are found in New Guinea including the glider, ringtail, pygmy and striped (36). Related to the opossum is the phalanger commonly know as the cuscus (Figure 23) (36). Tree kangaroos and bush kangaroos are other types of marsupial shared between the two land masses as well as the little known quoll, very similar to the Australian variety (Figure 24) (36). In addition, a rat sized marsupial of the phascogale family has several varieties in New Guinea (36). All of these
animals are hunted for their fur, teeth and meat (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 18).

The flightless cassowary, a bird similar to the emu of Australia, is the largest bird on the island (Figure 25) (Ford 1973, 37). It is hunted for its meat, feathers and bone (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 19). Bower birds are also native to both New Guinea and Australia (Ford 1973, 37). Other birds of the swamp include varieties of pigeons, the white cockatoo, the black palm cockatoo, many varieties of parrots, the wood chicken or jungle fowl, owls, egrets, several kinds of birds of paradise, and many varieties of hornbills (Figure 26, Figure 27, Figure 28) (Eyde 1967, 11). They are mainly used for their feathers although eggs are gathered for extra protein (64).

Bats are common in New Guinea and are related to many Australian bats (Ford 1973, 35). Flying foxes are commonplace to both areas and are plentiful in the swamp (Figure 29) (35). These bats are known for eating fruit and can have up to a five foot wing span (35).

The Asmat region has reptiles such as lizards, snakes, turtles and freshwater crocodiles (Eyde 1967, 11). Lizard skin is used for drum heads as can be seen in figure 11 (54). Saltwater crocodiles were extensively hunted by foreigners, almost to the point of nonexistence in the area; however, they were not totally wiped out and still presented a danger in 1970 (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 19). Crocodiles are eaten and the jaw bone is used to create a dagger (Schneebaum 1990, 14, 95).

The Bismam eat many varieties of fish including saltwater species such as sawfish, thornback, shark, and ray fish (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 19). Where the water becomes fresh, the large catfish is the best catch (Eyde 1967, 11). Crustaceans,
such as shrimp, crabs, and crawfish, are easily found along the stream and river beds (9-10). Mussel is eaten and its shell is utilized as a knife or scraper (24). This shell is one of many kinds of shells burned to produce lime (24). Men fish with bows and arrows, spears, harpoons, and traps (18). Women usually fish with nets, which are ideal for catching shrimp and small fish (19). The nuclear family unit works together to utilize fish traps (19). The abundance of marine life guarantees a stable easily exploited food source that assures the Bismam a nutritional adequate diet (23).

The Papuan dog is a working animal that has to prove its worth at hunting (59). Once done, the dog is spoiled with leftover sago and fish (59). A well-respected dog is given the name of an ancestor and becomes so beloved that upon its passing, it would be mourned with the type of wailing used for human deaths (59). Dogs are used to hunt wild pig (61).

Boar meat is highly prized (Figure 30). Their tusks are used for necklaces, and their bone is carved to create nose ornaments (Zuberinich 1997, 113). Hunting wild boar has become a substitute for hunting humans, and the successful boar hunter gains prestige (113).

Also gathered from the bush, are a variety of edible food stuffs including snails, termites, insects and honey (Eyde 1967, 64). Even though colonization has had dramatic effects on the people, they still maintain a hunting-gathering lifestyle dependant primarily on the sago palm (Zubrinich 1997, 106).

**Social and Political Organization**

Father Zegwaard, in 1959, estimated the population of the Asmat at 25,000 (Zegwaard 1959, 1020). In 1990, Tobias Schneebaum estimated the population at 65,000 by including people of the outlying areas of whom Zegwaard was not aware.
(Schneebaum 1990, 12). In 1993, Dirk Smidt had a similar population estimate between 50,000 to 70,000 (Smidt 1993, 17). Villages are settled along rivers to facilitate travel, and in the past this location allowed the men to lookout constantly for headhunting parties (Figure 31) (Gerbrands 1967, 24). A large powerful village is seated on the main artery of a river at a bend or at the connection of a branch (Smidt 1993, 17). Smaller villages are located further back on tributaries to the main river and consist of about one hundred members, while the larger villages have as many as two thousand people (Smidt 1996, 49). In the past, villages would relocate to find better food sources when over-harvesting occurred (Sowada 1961, 35).

Every village has at least one men’s house or yeu, but more often a village has two or more men’s houses, and a large village has as many as six (Sowada, 1961, 19). In the volatile days of headhunting, the competition among yeus was fierce and pervaded all aspects of life (Eyde 1967, 89). Each yeu had enough members and autonomy to form its own village if community tensions ever warranted such a move (Smidt 1993, 18).

The men’s house is the building closest to the river (Figure 32) (Eyde 1967, 100). It is rectangular and built on pilings six to twelve feet high (90). It is from one hundred to two hundred feet long and twenty to thirty feet wide (90). Nipah and sago palm leaves are used as thatch on the peaked roof (90). Between the river and the men’s house is a large clearing, like a courtyard, and a village path (Figure 31) (Sowada 1961, 18). Notched logs or simple ladders serve as stairs to allow access to a three foot wide porch (18). Several open doorways run along the long side of the building that faced the river (Zegwaard and Boelaars 1982, 17). Each doorway represents a kin group (Eyde 1967, 97).
Across from the door are two fireplaces that are the property of the related families that make up the extended family (90). A fireplace is merely a mud slab placed directly on the floor (90). The fireplace is surrounded by four poles that, if the yeu has “certain rights,” are *bis* poles, elaborately carved poles that represent the ancestors (Figure 33) (96). Behind the fireplace, a rack provides storage for firewood, sago, and personal items. (95) Fish and meat can smoke-dried on this rack as well (95). The rafters provide a place for extra storage for possessions such as spears and paddles (95). Ceremonial objects such as ancestor figures, masks and drums are stored in the back of the yeu in a special room partitioned from view by palm fronds (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 31). Women and children are not allowed to see certain objects until they appear as part of a ceremony that involved the entire community (31). In the hot and humid climate of this region, the vegetation used to build rots easily; therefore, men’s houses are reconstructed at least every five years (Gerbrands 1967, 25). The opening of a new men’s house is celebrated with a ritual feast (25).

Politically, each yeu is arranged by the upstream half and the downstream half; in the center, a common area used by both groups is complete with a central fireplace (28). Leaders from each half meet at the central hearth, to discuss important matters that are common to the entire group (Smidt 1993, 18). The central hearth also serves as a reception area for formal guests (18).

The yeu is a living quarter for unmarried men and boys, and it serves as a school for the boys to learn myths, songs, morals and anything relevant to the life (Gerbrands 1967, 25). Married men spend the day at the men’s house and sleep there when their wives are menstruating (Eyde 1967, 89). A clearing in front of the yeu serves as an area
to carve, to dance, to hold mock battles and, in the past, to bury the dead (Gerbrands 1967, 28). The dead are now buried across the river from the village (Kirk 1972, 399).

Before the conversion to Christianity, all religious activities were conducted at the yeu. Rituals took many months to plan, prepare and execute and were cyclic; therefore once a ritual was completed, the planning for a new one began (Eyde 1967, 337-338). In the past, rituals were used to enhance life, by insuring fertility in youngsters, communicating with the ancestors, and solidifying relationships within the community or between villages.

Most families have a home either next to or behind the men’s house with which the head of the household is aligned (Eyde 1967, 100). Before the influence of missionaries, a prestigious man may have more than one wife, and all the wives occupied the house with her children (101). In this case, each wife was given a separate fireplace for cooking for her children and to establish her section of the home (101). Boys over the age of ten live at the men’s house and girls live with their parents until they are married (179). In the past, a young married couple often sought an alliance with a powerful headhunting male relative, brother, brother-in-law, father, or father-in-law (238). In the case of co-residence, the young married couple added an addition to the home of a prestigious male relative giving them their own doorway opening and fireplace (238).

The Bismam live in an egalitarian society where social status is earned (Zegwaard 1959, 1040). In the past the Asmat led a semi-nomadic lifestyle in the swamp habitat (Sowada 1961, 35). Sago territories could become depleted from over-harvesting, and marine life also went through periods of scarcity (Eyde 1967, 237). This combination of territorial pressures led to acquisitions of new territory through headhunting (237).
Wealth and prestige were acquired through the gathering of more food, through the labor and territory of multiple wives, and territory gained through headhunting (235). Food and territory were then distributed to members of one’s family, yeu (237). Receivers were obligated to the giver to reciprocate either in the form of food, favors or both (234). Thus, headhunters were esteemed for their ability to hunt as well as to gain territory and were positioned to become the most powerful members of the community (307).

Alliances with a powerful man were created through marriage, and, before conversion to Christianity, alliances were also created among married men through the exchange of their wives (Sowada 1961, 81). This was known as a papisj relationship. (Zegwaard & Boelaars 1982, 21). Married men sought to create bond friends with members of other yeus within a village (22). This relationship provided additional resources through reciprocal exchanges of food and established alliances that could be counted on in headhunting raids (22). In village disputes, a bond friend was expected to fight with his friend even if it was against his own yeu (22). The husband had to ask his wife to participate in the exchange (22). Zegwaard and Boelaars described the men’s attitude as they discussed the exchange with their wives, “They must talk them into the exchange. It seems to be a delicate matter and the men must be on their best behavior to convince both women” (22). If she denied her husband’s request, she would suffer physical and emotional abuse, but she had the right to refuse (22). Since women vicariously shared in the prestige of their husbands, and this exchange increased the wealth and prestige of their husbands, one can theorize that a woman would willingly participate.
Prior to the banning of headhunting, headhunters were socially the most admired because of their ability to increase wealth and create alliances through marriages and *papisj* relationships (Eyde 1967, 349). Furthermore, headhunters were able to manipulate these alliances to become prestigious leaders, bigman (*tesumajipic*) within the community (236).

*Tesumajipic* was the highest position, and many men of the village achieved this status (236). A *tesumajipic* was a leader in his family, his extended family and his yeu, and sometimes his influence extended across the entire village (349). Warsekomen, Father Zegwaard’s chief informant, was one such *tesumajipic* (Sowada 1961, 81). He was known to have taken nine heads (Sowada 1968, 193). He was related to half of the *yeu* leaders throughout the village (Sowada 1961, 81). He had seven wives who were related to men’s house leaders he was not related to (81). He had fourteen children and was related to 41% of the population of Sjuru (81). He also had six *papisj* alliances (81).

**Bismam Cosmology**

This section reviews a few points about Bismam cosmology. The first is the myth of creation, the second a relationship between humans and trees and the third is the belief that a spirit migrated cyclically through three planes of existence.

Before the acceptance of Christianity, the Bismam understanding of creation figured prominently in the everyday life and ritual activities. Today, this idea still resonates meaning. The myth of Fumeripitsj explains the origin of the Bismam people. It also provides a framework for many of the metaphors and for the symbolism in the Bismam cosmology. Tobias Schneebaum explains the story of creation:

One day, while out fishing, Fumeripitsj, the Creator, fell into the river and drowned. His body washed up on a small island. Some birds flying over the island saw the body and, not knowing whether it was alive or dead, tried to revive it with
medicine, but the body lay still. They decided to see War, the great sea eagle, to ask his advice. War agreed to help if the birds would bring the medicine he needed. War flew to the island, put some of the medicine on a stick, and anointed the joints of Fumeripitsj as well as his chest and forehead. Fumeripitsj still did not move. War called for a different medicine and anointed the same parts as before. This time Fumeripitsj began to move. Suddenly he began to scream, and all the birds but War flew away in fear. Fumeripitsj sat up and said, “I am Fumeripitsj.” The sea eagle said, “I am War.”

Fumeripitsj went into the jungle and built a feast house but he was lonely. He cut down trees and carved figures, each with a head and a body with arms and legs. Some were male; some were female. He placed them inside the feast house, but he was still lonely. So he cut down a tree, hollowed out a section of log, and carved a drum. He covered one end with a lizard skin, gluing it there with lime and some of his own blood, and tied it with rattan. When Fumeripitsj beat on the drum, the figures began to dance and sing in the normal way. Thus the Asmat came into being.

Later, Fumeripitsj was attacked by a crocodile. He fought the huge reptile, killed it, cut up the body, and threw the many pieces up into the sky. The pieces fell to earth and turned into other people, other tribes, and other races. (Schneebaum 1990, 26)

Significant ideas expressed within this myth include the following: the belief that someone who was dead can come back to life with the correct magical formula, the power of a woodcarver to create, the power of drums to animate, and the idea that others were equivalent to crocodiles. However, the most important idea of this myth is the idea that the Bismam people were originally trees. This idea permeates Bismam life, and trees play a significant role in the culture. The sago palm provides most of the diet. It provides shelter and even decorations. As resources for the commodities of everyday life, the sago palm and other trees are essential to the quality of life. Like the story of the origin of the Bismam, the story of the origin of the sago palm is also explained in a myth. The ancestor, Biwiripitsj, accidentally sank in the mud of a swamp (Zegwaard 1959, 1038). Where he sank, a sago palm grew and his head sprouted in the fruit of the palm (1038). This is very similar to the myth, mentioned earlier by Sowada, where two ancestors became sago trees so that others would have food (Sowada 1961, 35).
All of these myths linking humans and ancestors to trees contribute to a prominent Bismam metaphor. Zegwaard explains, “…the human body is associated with a tree: the legs compare to the plank roots, the trunk to the human body, the arms to the boughs, the head to the top (often with the fruit that sits in the top)” (Zegwaard 1959, 1039). Furthermore, a male who is adorned with a headdress, necklaces and body paint is considered to be in “full blossom” like a sago palm is when it reaches maturity (1033).

Continuing the tree metaphor, headhunters consider themselves “younger-brothers” to birds and other animals that eat fruit, such as cockatoos, hornbills, flying-foxes, cuscus, and tree kangaroos (1039). The birds and animals hunt for fruit from trees in the same manner that the warrior hunts for skulls, the fruit equivalent in humans (1039). This metaphor is enhanced when the animal is the same color as the Bismam person, as seen in the black king cockatoo, hornbill, cassowary, wild boar and flying fox (Gerbrands 1967, 30). The cassowary eats fruit from the forest floor instead of from trees (Beechler, Pratt, and Zimmerman 1986, 45). It is considered a worthy adversary and is hunted in the same way as the wild boar (Eyde 1967, 63). The wild boar also eats fruit from the forest floor and is a blackish animal (Parker 1990, 22). It too is considered a worthy adversary and is hunted in the same manner as a human victim (Zubrinich 1997, 113). The metaphor of fruit eater to the headhunter will be seen in many different manifestations when looking at ancestor skulls and trophy skulls in the following chapters.

One final spiritual belief to understand is the migration of the spirit through the living realm and the spiritual realm. Although the Bismam have accepted Christianity, they still understand their world as one filled with spirits (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 103). Several types of lifeforces and spirits combine to create a living person. The ndat,
ancestral spirit is one such spirit that has a unique journey migrating through three planes of existence (Kuruwaip 1982, 21). The first is the living world, the second is an intermediate plane known as ndamir, and the last is safan, the realm of the ancestors (Sowada 1990, 70). This ancestral spirit passes through each of these levels in a cyclic movement (Kuruwaip 1982, 21). The spirit is dependent on family members, both living and dead, to help it navigate through these levels, each of which ideally maintains an equal number of members to preserve the balance and order of the universe (Kuruwaip 1982, 21).

The Bismam believe that a spirit begins life by choosing a woman who has demonstrated excellence in her role as mother (Sowada 1990, 67). The spirit enters the body of a tree frog and jumps on the shoulder of its chosen mother, which causes spontaneous conception (67). However, the spirit is not complete (67). Only a part of the spirit force enters the women’s body at conception (67). When the child reaches a certain maturity, he is given its spirit name, the ndat, thus infusing the person with another animating force (67). Once the individual is properly named, the spirit is fully contained in the person (67).

When a person dies, his or her spirit enters the middle plane, ndamir, the realm of the dead (Kuruwaip 1982, 22). Ndamir is meant to be only a temporary dwelling place for the spirit (21). In order for a spirit to move from ndamir to safan, living family members perform a number of rituals (21). However, if the spirit is not properly remembered through ceremonies and feasts, it becomes malevolent and can cause tragedy (Schneebaum 1990, 52).
The last level, *safan*, is located in the setting sun at the point where the sea meets the sky (Kuruwaip 1982, 22). When the spirit is in *safan*, it is benevolent, and can be asked to bestow favors on its living relatives (22). *Safan* is equated with extraordinary prosperity, and ancestral spirits have to reach *safan* in order to be reborn (Sowada 1990, 70). The Bismam concept of the spiritual world is a world of mutual exchange or reciprocity. The living need the benevolence of an ancestor to help with daily existence, and the dead need the living to perform rituals to insure their successful migration through the spirit world.

I will now explore ancestor skulls and trophy skulls using the concepts and information presented in this chapter.
CHAPTER 3
ANCESTOR SKULLS

A typical ancestor skull collected from the village of Pirimapun in 1956 was created from the remains of someone who died of natural causes and whose corpse was treated in a traditional manner (Figure 34). Ancestor skulls were kept by family members and adorned with a variety of materials such as seeds, wood, fiber netting, and feathers creating an assemblage. Missionaries have convinced the Bismam people to change their traditional burial practices; thus, ancestor skulls are no longer created (Kirk 1972, 399).

This chapter begins with a review of the dress and adornment of a living Bismam person. The reader will be introduced to the types of ornaments, the materials used to create the ornaments, and the prestige associated with the ornaments. This evaluation of ornaments will allow the reader better insight into the prestige associated with the adornment of the ancestor skull. Then, I will compare the ancestor skull to a carrying bag and a ceremonial paddle both of which are objects that connote the status of the owner.

The next section describes Bismam funeral practices. Although mourning rituals are the same today, burial customs have changed. Traditional burial practices are described so that the reader understands how the ancestor skull was obtained. This section ends with a visual analysis of the adornment of ten ancestor skulls.

The next section describes the protective function of the ancestor skull. First, the reader is introduced to the types of spirits and lifeforces that may cause the living harm. In the days of headhunting, the shield physically protected the owner in battle, but it also provided spiritual protection and empowered the owner. It will be suggested that the
ancestor skull is also believed to protect and empower its owner spiritually. Next, this section will compare the symbolic designs carved on the shields and the symbolic objects used to create the ancestor skull assemblage and suggest that these forms had a similar function.

The last section of this chapter argues that the ancestor skull functions as a mode of communication between the living owner and the dead relative. For the reader to understand this possibility, the paper examines the function of the jipae masquerade to allow the living to communicate with the dead. The paper compares the belief that the ndat spirit inhabits both the jipae mask and the ancestor skull. Finally, the paper compares the adornment of the jipae mask with the adornment of the ancestor skull and concludes that the similarity of adornment suggests a pattern of representing an ancestor spirit.

**Dress and Adornment**

This section will briefly review the objects and materials that a Bismam individual wears, allowing the reader to compare the objects and materials worn by the living with those used to adorn an ancestor skull. This section will also introduce the carrying bag and the ceremonial paddle as objects that convey status and compare them to the ancestor skull, which also conveys status.

**Fiber Ornaments**

Sago palm fronds and rattan palm fronds are plaited to construct some items of adornment. A woman’s skirt, known as an aver, is a belt with thin strips of sago leaves woven to the front that are long enough to stretch from the front, between the legs, and secured to the back of the belt (Figure 35) (Eyde 1967, 41). The belt itself is made of plaited sago palm leaf fiber that can be woven into a pattern as seen in figure 35.
According to Van Amlesvoort, a woman’s marital state is revealed by her *awner* because only a married woman would wear it, yet Eyde states that this skirt is worn by all women who had been through puberty (Amlesvoort 1964, 34-35; Eyde 1967, 41).

A more recent photograph, taken in 1993, shows a woman wearing an *awner* combined with western clothing at a ceremonial event (*Figure 36*). This woman has used traditional fiber material and techniques to construct a new clothing form to cover her breasts. She also wears rattan arm bands around her bicep and forearm, while the man next to her wears an arm band around his bicep. The Bismam also wear leg bands typically worn on the calf (Eyde 1967, 56). Various materials such as leaves, sago strips and feathers can be added for additional decoration (56). Arm bands also serve as pockets and can be used to hold items such as a bone dagger (*Figure 36*) (Sowada 1961, 43). A forearm band is not only adornment but helps protect a hunter’s arm from the force of a bowstring (Rockefeller 1967, 152).

Men wear a plaited waist belt created from sago fiber. In the past, a waist belt was a common adornment but also worn at ritual events (*Figure 37*) (Eyde 1967, 41). Another ornament worn around the waist was the triton shell. In the past, it was an adornment reserved for distinguished headhunters: today, men of high status still wear the shell (25).

New sago fronds are collected and cut into thin strips and are frequently added to the person’s of individuals as well as to objects as decorative elements (Eyde 1967, 42). In *Figure 38*, strips of sago leaves are braided and intertwined with Ndanim’s hair, effectively lengthening his hair. Note that he also wears a rattan armband and sago waist band. Sago leaves are symbolic of the ancestors since the ancestors were the original
owners of the sago fields and their presence on an object or person signifies the presence of the ancestor (40-41).

**Necklaces**

Necklaces both for everyday wear and for ceremonial wear are constructed from a wide variety of materials including seeds, shells, and bone. The man shown in Figure 39 wears a necklace of seeds, one of teeth and one with a large piece of shell. The Bismam incorporate many kinds of shells such as mother-of-pearl and the chambered nautilus into their personal adornment (24). The man in Figure 40 wears a piece of shell for a necklace pendant and he also has a shell pendant for his headdress. For everyday wear, a simple piece of shell is fashioned into a pendant tied to a string and worn around the neck (24).

A necklace can be made of seeds from the *abrus precatorius*, more commonly known as the rosary pea, a striking red berry. Complementing the red of the *abrus*, is a seed from the *coix lacryma-jobi*, a wild grass also known as Job’s tears that range in color from white to grey to silver (Figure 41) (Ryan 1972, 231). These two “beads” are commonly used together to decorate many objects such as headdresses, ancestor skulls, carrying bags, nose ornaments, and sculptures.

A dog’s tooth necklace is prized even though they are a typical item most people would own (Eyde 1967, 60). Both women and married men wear dog’s tooth necklaces on ceremonial occasions (60). In a photograph of a *bis* ritual Figure 36, a woman is shown wearing two dogs tooth necklaces. Father Zegwaard noted that in the days of headhunting, a dogs’ tooth necklace was used as a substitute for a bamboo necklace in a part of the initiation ritual, (a ritual that required a head of an enemy) and that young unmarried men could thus have a dogs’ tooth necklace (Zegwaard 1959, 1023). Papuan dogs are kept as hunting dogs and not pets. Therefore, one could assume that the necklace
reflected hunting prowess. Many other kinds of animal’s teeth were fashioned into necklaces such as: pig, human, marsupial, and rat (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 183).

Traditionally, the boar’s tusk was associated with headhunting, and wearing it meant that the wearer had successfully captured a head (Schneebaum 1990, 59). The Bismam also believe that wearing a boar’s tusk weakened a human enemy, making him easier to overpower (Zegwaard 1959, 1033). Boar’s tusk is still worn today but reflects the prowess of hunting just the wild boar. The woman in Figure 42 wears a boar’s tusk necklace that may reflect her husband’s power as a hunter.

Bamboo was employed to fabricate ritual decapitation knives and headhunting horns. Special necklaces with bamboo pendants were given to an initiate during the course of the initiation ritual (Eyde 1967, 57). The pendant was designed to resemble the decapitation knife, forming a link between the two objects (57). The woman in Figure 42 also wears a bamboo ornament necklace, barely visible in the lower left corner of the photo.

**Earrings**

The woman in Figure 42 wears earrings made from loops of metal and of braided fiber with a string of materials including cassowary quills, abrus seeds, coix seeds, and a piece nautilus shell attached (59). The man in Figure 43 wears braided rattan earrings.

**Nose Ornaments**

Nose ornaments are worn through the septum sometimes as everyday wear but more frequently for ceremonial occasions (Eyde 1967, 60). Shell, pig bone, cassowary bone, and wood are used to make this jewelry with a wide variety of ornate and simple forms (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 183).
After being eaten, a wild boar’s thigh bone is elaborately carved to create a distinctive nose ornament (Eyde 1967, 61). While the ornament is worn by both men and women, it is more often used by men on ceremonial occasions because men are responsible for hunting. In the past, boars were regarded as similar to human victims (Gerbrands 1967, 43). Figure 44 shows Jaobenum wearing an elaborate pig bone carved to resemble a praying mantis, a figure associated with headhunting (Smidt 1993, 30).

The men in Figure 45 wear the very important *bipane* nose ornaments. To make the *bipane* ornament two spirals are cut from mother-of-pearl and glued together with resin creating a bisymmetrical piece (Gerbrands 1967, 42). The completed ornament, delicately threaded through the septum is symbolic of boldness and power (Zegwaard 1959, 1033). The *bipane* has two animal associations. First, the halves look like the tusks of a boar (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 183). Second, the one side resembles the cuscus tail, again a reference to a fruit eater as brother to the headhunter (Gerbrands 1967, 42). Men usually wear this ornament but for special occasions a woman would sometimes wear it (Figure 46) (Eyde 1967, 24). The man in Figure 37 also wears a *bipane* nose ornament.

**Headdress**

Cassowary, cockatoo, crown pigeon, hornbill and bird of paradise were just a few of the types of birds whose feathers are collected and stuck into the hair as adornment. The woman on the left in Figure 46 wears bird of paradise feathers and white cockatoo feathers. Cassowary feathers and white cockatoo feathers are symbolic of toughness and bravery (Zegwaard 1961, 1033). The cassowary also symbolizes speed. In the days of headhunting, a warrior who wanted to increase his speed for battle drew a cassowary foot
on the bottom of his foot (Zegwaard 1959, 1033). The man in Figure 41 wears cassowary feathers and white cockatoo feathers.

As a fruit eater, the hornbill was considered a brother of the headhunter also (1039). The hornbill also figured in Asmat mythology and was considered a link between the world of the living and the spirit realm, and it was believed that a spirit of the recently dead might inhabit the hornbill (Sowada 1961, 45; Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 29). The male hornbill has honey-colored feather on its head and white feathers on its tail, both of which are worn as personal decoration (Gerbrands 1967, 30).

Feathers may also enliven objects such as spears, paddles, bags and sculptures (Eyde, 1967, 63). Several feathers are glued to a stick and placed into the hair to create a bold statement as seen in figures 37, 39, 40, 45, and 46.

Feathers attached to a stick are often combined with a cuscus pelt to make a headdress. The cuscus pelts have a range of colors-white, spotted, tawny, black or brown (Eyde 1967, 62). In the past, the cuscus was identified as a headhunter’s brother because it is also a fruit eater (Zegwaard 1959, 1039). The Bismam believed that the spirit of a recently deceased individual might reside temporarily in the cuscus, thus directly identifying the animal with the ancestors (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 29). The men in figures 36, 39, 40 and 45 wear cuscus pelt headbands with edgings of seeds.

**Body Paint**

The Bismam wear a variety of painted designs on their bodies and faces. Body paints derive from a number of sources. Since clay does not occur naturally in the swamp environment, it is obtained through trade from further inland, and yellow clay is burned to produce red paint (Schneebaum 1990, 33). White pigment is derived from three sources: clay, sago flour or pulverized shells. Black is made from charcoal ash (33). Red,
white, and black symbolize qualities of bravery and power (Zegwaard 1959, 1033). The individuals in Figure 21 are gathered to celebrate a contemporary *bis* ceremony, and wear a wide variety of body paint styles. For example, the woman in the center of the photograph on the right hand side has white chevrons on her arm, dots and dashes on her chest, and her face has white areas pained her cheeks and forehead punctuated with dashes of white paint close to her eye. The woman standing next to her has red and white stripes on her arms, large red and white stripes across her chest, stripes of white on her cheek, forehead and nose, and two red stripes under her eye across her cheek. In Figure 10, a number of men in their canoes illustrate variations of body paint. For example, the man at the front of the canoe on the left hand side wears white paint on his legs, arms, and chest. He painted bold stripes of white down the middle of his forehead across his nose, and he painted another large stripe from his ear to the tip of his chin. In the next canoe, the man at the front wears large stripes of white across his abdomen and arms. He wears a white stripe across the right side of his face and a black stripe across the left side of his face. In the next canoe, the man at the prow wears white stripes across his legs and a large patch of white on his chest. In the last canoe, the man at the prow wears white paint from his knee to ankle, and he painted the front of his chest white. He painted the front of his arms white, and he outlined his brow ridge in white with a white dab on his nose.

**Ornaments as Armament**

Rituals are a chance for married men and women to dress more ornately, especially if they are participants in the event (Eyde 1967, 60). In the past, for a man, dressing for a ceremony or a headhunting raid was the same. Even though headhunting is no longer practiced, men will still wear ornaments that are symbolically associated with
headhunting and serve to signify the status of the wearer. Gerbrands described the goal of a headhunter when dressing himself for a raid:

… the Asmat transforms himself into one of the black, fruit-eating birds or flying animals. He sticks white feathers in his hair to imitate the hornbill, which had white tail feathers. He paints red around his eyes, for a black king cockatoo suddenly shows a red color on a bare spot around its eyes when angry, upset or afraid. On his forehead he wears a fur band made for the skin of the cuscus, incidentally, it is also used as a symbol of the headhunter, as it is a fruiteater, though not a flying one. (Rockefeller 1967, 15)

This is the same goal that a man with status has when dressing for a ceremonial event as seen in Figure 37, Figure 39, Figure 40 and Figure 45. These men have stuck white feathers in their hair and are wearing cuscus fur headdress. Furthermore, feathers and marsupial pelts associate the wearer with fruit eating birds and animals and encourage the wearer to identify with headhunters. The attire of white feathers, cuscus headdress and a bipane nose ornament as seen in Figure 45 has multiple symbolic associations. The white feathers allude to the cockatoo and hornbill, which is also fruit eater and in addition is a link to the ancestor realm because hornbills can embody the spirit of the recently dead. The cuscus, like the hornbill, is also a fruit eater and capable of containing the spirit of the recently dead. The bipane nose ornament resembles the boar’s tusks making it a tool to spiritually disarm the enemy and it resembles the cuscus tail allowing the wearer to identify himself as a fruit eater and the headhunter.

For the Bismam in the days of headhunting, many of these adornments not only symbolized certain qualities, such as prowess in hunting, but actually instilled them in the wearer (Zegwaard 1959, 1033). The Bismam had a concept of adornment acting as a shield or “armament” (1033). Therefore, they would not have entered a battle without proper adornment.
In the past, when wearing adornments on ordinary days, the wearer would proceed cautiously because many ornaments were considered powerful and wearing them sometimes was construed as an act of aggressive (1033). However, Gerbrands remarked that Matjemos, a sculptor from Amanamkai in 1961, donned a cuscus headband while he carved a commissioned work in the men’s house (Gerbrands 1967, 53). Gerbrands theorized that Matjemos must have felt that the project was significant enough to dress for the occasion (53). Thus, one can suggest that some ornaments, such as Matjemos’ headdress, were worn to address the significance of the task of the day and not necessarily meant to suggest aggressive activities such as headhunting.

On ceremonial occasions, women often donned ornaments typically reserved for men thus allowing her to display her prestige achieved by her association with a man (Figure 42 and Figure 46). For ceremonial events or as everyday wear men demonstrate their personal power by donning these potent ornaments.

**Objects That Convey Status**

Certain objects are worn or carried to state clearly that the owner is a person of the highest status, bigman or *tesumajipic*. In the past, a *tesumajipic* was a person who was a renowned headhunter and had enough political stature to be consulted on community affairs. Although headhunting is on longer practiced, *tesumajipic* are still found in the Bismam political structure and are still signified by carrying or wearing these objects.

Both males and females wear carrying bags, know as *eram ese* (Eyde 1967, 42). In mythology, ancestors from long ago left special objects in their carrying bags to pass down to future generations (Zegwaard 1959, 1033).

Women construct the bags from sago palm fronds. They measure about a foot wide and a foot high (Figure 47) (Eyde 1967, 42). Carrying bags are decorated with white
feathers, cassowary quills, red seeds, and white seeds. A woman wears the carrying bags suspended from her neck hanging on her back. The woman in the center of the photograph in Figure 48 is wearing her bag on her back.

Men of lower status also wear carrying bags on their back. A man of high status such as a leader in the men’s house or a master carver wears his bags hanging on his chest (42). The man on the left in the photograph in Figure 48 wears his bag on his chest, thus proclaiming his higher status.

Although paddles are not dress, they serve as a type of personal adornment that indicates status (50). Paddles can be of the everyday variety (Figure 49) or of the ceremonial variety (Figure 12). While a typical paddle is about six to eight feet, a ceremonial paddle is longer, about seven to nine feet (49). A ceremonial paddle could have a figure carved into the handle and usually has low relief designs on the shaft and fin (49). One type of ceremonial paddle is completed with white cockatoo feathers attached to the handle (Figure 10), and another type has black cassowary feathers (Figure 50) (49). These special paddles are only carried by a tesumajipics who are allowed to carry their paddles on their shoulders while the typical paddle is carried by in the hand (50). Several examples of paddles with white feathers can be seen in the photograph of men in their canoes in Figure 10.

The ownership of an ancestor skull is a statement of prestige. Schneebaum reports that the first born male received the ancestor skull of his parent (Schneebaum 1990, 56). However, Zegwaard and Boelaars state that the brother-in-law of the deceased with the most influence received the skull and effectively took the place of the deceased in the family and community (Zegwaard and Boelaars 1982, 25-26). The eldest male in
the family line is a higher status person that his siblings, male or female. In Bismam society, brothers-in-law are equivalents to actual brothers. Although a discrepancy of who actually inherited the skull exists, it is clear that the inheritor had to be at the top of a line of succession either through age or influence.

Like the carrying bag and the ceremonial paddle, the way in which the ancestor skull is worn testifies to the status of the wearer. Women could inherit an ancestor skull but they could not wear it. Males of lower status wore the skull to the back as seen in Figure 50. Only a male of high standing in the community, a *tesumajipic*, wore their ancestor skull to the front. Wearing the ancestor skull was thus a visual statement of the prestige of the wearer (Figure 37 and Figure 43).

**Funeral**

**Death**

When someone dies due to illness or old age, the family surrounds them as they die (Arsdale 1982, 50). Close female relatives announce the family’s loss with wailing, a loud, moaning cry (50). This signal informs the village that someone has died (50). This sound is also believed to reach beyond the world of the living and into the ancestor realm to inform the spirit community of the loss (50). This oral expression of grief is combined with a wrenching physical act of grief in which both male and female relatives go to the riverbank and vigorously fling themselves, repeatedly, into the thick mud (Figure 52) (50).

Robert Mitton, a camp manager for a mining company and admitted “New Guineaphile”, visited the village of Sawa, in the Northwest Asmat region. After he witnessed this grieving practice, he wrote a colorful description in his journal. The funeral process began when a villager, Arim, became extremely ill. Mitton writes,
Shortly after lunch the wailing for Arim intensifies. ... the wailing goes on all day and through the night, and so many people crowd into the house beating on the walls that it threatens to collapse. During this pre-death wailing period, friends of the mourners take up strategic positions in the house, for at the moment of death all hell breaks loose, and the mourners are in danger of doing themselves grievous bodily harm. People hurl themselves out of doorways and, as another sign of grief, wallow and almost drown themselves in mud. ... There is a false alarm when they think Arim has died, and a horn is sounded; everyone throws himself out of the house into the mud. Then another man dies in a neighbouring house--new grief. When Arim eventually dies, there is phenomenal out pouring of grief. Emotionally exhausting. (7 March) The mourning for both characters continues all night, and in the early dawn preparations are made to bury chap number one. At this point, the mourning becomes very intense; men and women are throwing themselves from the house into mud, rolling in it in grief. ... The women roll themselves in mud, entirely naked, then from the mud back to the house they perform a slow stooped walk with their arms clasped around their thighs. At the house, a jumping dance is performed, what Father Van De Wouw calls a ‘frog dance’. When the corpse is carried from the house, everyone starts throwing himself upon it, to be dragged off by his less grieved neighbours. The funeral ends when the corpse is placed in a canoe and taken to the other side of the river to be buried. (Mitton 1983, 190)

From Mitton’s description, the reader can get a sense of the dramatic display of grief that death elicits from any Asmat person. The act of flinging oneself into the mud has a specific purpose. It is believed that the scent of the living relative needs to be hidden from the spirit of the deceased and the mud serves to cover the scent of the living (Zegwaard 1959, 1039-1040). The Bismam believe that the recently deceased spirit is able to recognize and follow its family’s smell (1039-1040). Furthermore, the spirit has the ability to entice a living person’s lifeforce out of their body. If this is accomplished, the Bismam believe that a person would fall into a catatonic state and die. The mud disguise ensures that the spirit would not find its living family and would then begin its migration into the spirit realm.

In addition to the wailing and rolling in the mud of his relatives, a tesumajipic received a chanted eulogy consisting of a description of the individual’s qualities and his lifetime achievements (Arsdale 1982, 50). This memorializing could be impromptu and...
conducted by the female mourners or by a specialist who is hired to recite before the family and friends gathered at the deceased’s yeu (50). The recitation for a distinguished male continues a few hours a day for a significant period (50).

**Burial**

Burial practices have changed due the influence of the Dutch administration and missionary activities. Today people are buried across the river from the village. In the past, the treatment of the body varied with the status of the individual or the circumstances of death. Most men and women were buried in the courtyard of the yeu, unless the woman had perished in childbirth (Smidt 1993, 19). Her body was considered dangerous and had to be removed far from the community (19). Children’s bodies were placed in tree limbs (19). The bodies of renowned headhunters and community leaders were laid on a platform in the courtyard of the yeu and covered with woven mats (19). Sometimes their bodies were place in special trees that were “spiritually charged” (19). A corpse that had been left on a platform was guarded from animals by the lower status members of the men’s house and young boys (Schneebaum 1990, 56).

Van Amelsvoort noted that, “The family may place objects which serve ritual functions such as nose bones and bracelets on the corpse” (Amelsvoort 1964, 53). Eyde wrote that family members placed objects such as “…axes, knives, flying fox caps…” on the grave site as payment to the men who dug the grave. The photograph in Figure 53 was taken in 1957 of a female corpse displayed on a platform along with her awer, a skirt she would have worn everyday, and a bow with arrows, contributed by her husband (53). Although no specific information about the nature of the objects was noted at the time, it might be suggested that bows and arrows were tools used by men in Bismam society and as such could be interpreted to be an item for payment to a male grave digger. However,
the deliberate placement of the deceased’s *awer*, an everyday item of personal adornment only worn by adult females, seems to be a way to identify the person rather than a payment for services. Thus, the placement of items of personal adornment on the corpse may be a preliminary step in the decoration of the ancestor skull which would correspond to Van Amelsvoort’s description of the objects being of a “ritual function” (53). If these men were responsible for the entire burial process, perhaps some objects placed on the corpse were for payment and some were to be used to decorate the skull.

Once the body had deteriorated to a state where the skull had dislodged naturally, then the rest of the corpse could be buried or placed in a tree (Schneebaum 1990, 56). Husbands of the sisters and daughters of the deceased were responsible for the burial (Eyde 1967, 202).

Once exposure to the weather removed the flesh from the skull, it was taken to the *yeu* to be decorated (Zegwaard and Boelaars 1982, 25-26). Zegwaard and Boelaars reported that the skull of a prestigious headhunter, or *tesumajipic*, was dealt with in the *nambir kus* ritual, but neither elaborates on the details of this ritual (Zegwaard and Boelaars 1982, 25-26). One can assume that because the skull was taken to the men’s house, a place where women were rarely allowed, and because the husbands of the sisters and daughters of the deceased were responsible for burial, men were in charge of creating the ancestor’s portrait on the skull.

**Ancestor Skull Assemblages**

The ancestor skulls described in the following pages were collected in the 1970s except for Figure 34, which was collected in 1956. These skulls most likely represent the last generation whose remains were treated in the traditional manner.
The ancestor skulls in Figure 2, Figure 34, Figure 37, Figure 43, Figure 51, Figure 54, Figure 55, Figure 56, Figure 57, Figure 58, Figure 59, Figure 60 are created in a consistent manner. First, the mandible is secured to the skull with a piece of thickly plaited rattan that creates a cord. This rattan cord is looped through the base of the skull and out the nasal cavity around the lower jaw and back to the base of the skull. The inclusion of the mandible is a clear indication that the skull is an ancestor skull, not a trophy skull. The skulls in Figure 51 and Figure 59 are the only ones that have lost their mandibles, but they can still be identified as ancestor skulls by the remaining adornments.

Ancestor skulls’ eye sockets and nasal cavities are filled with a mixture of beeswax and resin into which coix and abrus seeds are set. The resin in the nasal cavity helps to hold the rattan cord in place, and it also serves to secure any nose ornament to the skull. A headdress of plaited fiber on to which coix seeds have been sewn is attached. Strings of shells and coix seeds with white cockatoo feathers are attached to the main band. In some cases, braided rattan loops attached to the zygomatic arch form a configuration suggesting earrings. One can see the similarity to earrings by comparing the woman’s earrings in Figure 42 with the similar form on the skull in Figure 2. Often a string of plaited rattan is attached to the zygomatic arch. This string allows the skull to be suspended from the rafters of a house or to hang the skull from the living relative’s neck as a pendant (Figure 37, Figure 43 and Figure 51). Together this group of skulls suggests that a pattern of adornment is followed to create the ancestor skulls (Figure 2, Figure 34, Figure 37, Figure 43, Figure 51, Figure 54, Figure 55, Figure 56, Figure 57, Figure 58, Figure 59, Figure 60).
While each skull displays a basic pattern, individuality seems to be a strong factor as well. Compare the *bipane* nose ornament on the skull in Figure 2 to the ornately carved pig bone on the skulls in Figure 55 and Figure 56. One easily sees the impact that one ornament has enlivening each skull and setting it apart from others. This may seem a minor change, but, as described by Gerbrands, one item of adornment can make an impression even to an outsider. As a newly arrived observer among the Bismam of Amanamkai, Gerbrands described how such a seemingly insignificant feature as a nose ornament allowed him to distinguish one individual from others.

I had only been in the village for a week, and except for some of the leading men I had become familiar with only a few faces and the names belonging to them. Among the shouting crowd on the dancing-ground of Awok I had nevertheless noticed a rather retiring man of middle age because of the huge shell ornament he wore in his nose. (Gerbrands, 1967, 42)

Gerbrands stated that most Bismam wore a bone or shell ornament when they appeared in traditional costume, but as an outside observer, even he was able to make the distinctions based on the configuration of such ornaments. Comparing the *bipane* nose ornaments in Figure 2, Figure 37, Figure 45 and Figure 46, one can distinguish among them. Assuming that a member of the community could distinguish even more subtle differences, than a particular ornament could signify the individual that wore it.

Displaying even more variety is the skull in Figure 34 that uses a piece of sago palm wrapped with coix and abrus seeds as a nose ornament, and the skull in Figure 59 that has a stick with the ends decorated with coix and abrus seeds for a nose ornament. The individualism of the skull is enhanced even when a nose ornament is not used. The skulls in Figure 59, Figure 57, Figure 58, and Figure 60 do not have nose ornaments. The skull in Figure 54 has just the bright red abrus seeds filling the nose cavity, while the skull in Figure 57 uses just the coix seeds to adorn the nose cavity. The skulls in Figure
and Figure 60 have a combination of coix and abrus seeds filling the nose cavities. Each configuration of seeds adds to a sense of individualism.

The coix are white to grey to almost sliver in color while the abrus is a bright red. The Bismam use the colors black, red and white to paint their bodies for ritual occasions. The color combination employed on the skulls suggests a similarity to body paint. A quick visual scan of the individuals in Figure 10 and Figure 21 should allow the viewer to observe several instances of white and red paint on the face. Also note that the paint is applied in stripes, patches, and dots. Several individuals in Figure 21 wear necklaces made from the white coix seed, red abrus seeds or a combination of both seeds. Figure 41 provides a closer view of facial paint and an example of the striking red and white seed necklace. When considering the use of the red and white seeds in the adornment of the ancestor skull it is possible that these colors remind the viewer or face paint worn by the living and remind the viewer of the brightly colored seed necklaces worn by the living.

Also note how some of the skulls are distinguished by the structured placement of seeds. For example in Figure 34 the eye cavities of the skull have been given a circle of white coix seeds that surrounds a center of red abrus seeds. This effectively draws the viewer’s attention to the eye sockets of the skull. This same type of treatment can be seen in Figure 54 where prominent red abrus seeds have been purposely placed in the center of the eye sockets, also drawing the viewer’s focus to the eye sockets of the skull. The skull in Figure 34 also has a structured placement of seeds on the nasal cavity, which creates a stripe of red and white that is carried through to the nose ornament. The skull in Figure 2
has a pair of red abrus seeds deliberately set into the nasal cavity just above the *bipane* nose ornament that seems to point the viewer’s attention to the dramatic nose ornament.

Typically, a headdress is composed of the white cockatoo feathers, but, as one can see from Figure 55, cassowary feathers can be used. Hornbill feathers can also be used. The pattern of beading on the headdress varies as well. For example, compare the headdress of the ancestor skull in Figure 34, which has an x-pattern arrangement of coix seeds, with the liner pattern created by the arrangement of coix seeds on the border of the headdress shown in Figure 2. Furthermore, note how the x-pattern is increased to a horizontal row of four x-shapes in the border of the headdress illustrated in Figure 56. The border of the headdress in Figure 60 maintains the simple line of beads seen in Figure 2 but increases the row by two beads, adding to the variety of styles in a basic pattern.

In Figure 45, the men wear short white feathers attached to sticks and stuck in their hair and cuscus fur headbands with beading on the edge. In Figure 51, the living wears a cuscus headband with beading on the edge, along with an ancestor skull that wears a headdress of woven fiber beaded with coix seeds. One can see in Figure 51 that the beading serves to attach the feathers to the skull in the absence of hair.

Rattan loops attached to the side of the skull replicating earrings provide another opportunity for the individualism of the ancestor skull to be accentuated. Note the earrings on the ancestor skull shown in Figure 2. They are constructed with strings of seeds and shells, quills, and a tuft of cuscus fur. The ancestor skull in Figure 55 has an even larger tuft of fur. The ancestor skull in Figure 56 has one earring with a rhinoceros
beetle at the end, and the ancestor skull in Figure 57 has earrings with cassowary feathers at the tip.

Each of the skulls in Figure 2, Figure 34, Figure 37, Figure 43, Figure 51, Figure 54, Figure 55, Figure 56, Figure 57, Figure 58, Figure 59, and Figure 60 adheres to a pattern of adornment. However, the variety of materials used and the different configurations of that material strongly suggest a sense of individualism in each ancestor skull.

In traditional burial practices, personal objects such as nose ornaments and earrings were placed on the corpse. If one assumes that these personal objects such as a nose ornament were used to adorn the ancestor skull rather than payment for assistance in the burial ritual, and one assumes that a nose ornament signified a particular individual who was easily recognized by the members his community; then, it is highly probable that these skulls were visually constructed to recreate a portrait of a specific individual.

**Protection**

In addition to serving as portrait of a specific person, the ancestor skull also has a function that can best be understood when comparing that function to the way a shield is used. In order to understand this comparison, the reader must first understand the Bismam beliefs about spirits and lifeforces and how these energies may cause harm to a living human. This section will then examine the belief that a shield serves to protect its owners spiritually and to compare that to the belief that an ancestor skull also protects its owner. Finally, the author will compare a design carved on the shield to the bipane nose ornament used to adorn the ancestor skull, suggesting that the design and object have a similar function.
Spirits and Lifeforces

The Bismam seek spiritual protection for a variety of reasons. First, spirits from the forest, river and sea can be annoying and dangerous (Schneebaum 1990, 52). Second, the recently dead cause sickness and food shortages because their deaths have not been avenged (52). The recently dead may also lure away its relative’s lifeforce while they are mourning over the corpse. Third, spirits from women who died in childbirth are known to kidnap and kill men (Sowada 1990, 70).

Finally, the Bismam believe that several spiritual energies combined in a human to form a living creature. A person is born with two of these life forces: yuwus and ndamup (Sowada 1991, 66). Another element, in this case an ancestral spirit, ndat, joins the others in the early years of life, effectively completing the person (66).

The Bismam believe that for humans, the yuwus force is necessary for life (66). This force is clearly seen in strong human emotions such as fear, anger, hate, love (66). The yuwus is believed to be located in a person’s abdomen tied to his navel and its loss is considered fatal (66).

Ndamup, on the other hand, is an animating element found in all living things (66). In a human, this spirit takes on its host’s appearance, and is able to leave the body at will to roam or wander (66). The ndamup is located in the head, and when a person sleeps with his head in an uncomfortable position, his ndamup is especially prone to wandering (Zegwaard 1959, 1030). If this roaming spirit meets a living person, the observer would not be able to distinguish the spirit from its host because the ndamup, not only looks like the host, it can also speak and act like the host (1030). However, if the observer is able to recognize that they are interacting with the ndamup, he can warn the host of the impending danger thus saving the host’s life (1030).
The ndamup can also leave the host and move into other life forms, such as animals, and while possessing them it can become harmful (Sowada 1990, 66). Sowada reports that when a crocodile had killed several people in the village of Sawa, the villagers believed they were being victimized by the ndamup of a man from Erama in retaliation for an old headhunting raid (66).

During the period in which headhunting was still a vital part of existence, it was believed that the ndamup could be called away by enemies (Zegwaard 1959, 1030). As part of the events leading up to a headhunting raid, a specialist was called upon to summon the ndamup of individuals from the village intended for attack (1030). If the ndamup “[ate] the smell” of a burning mixture prepared by a specialist or if it “[ate] the smell” of a cooked pig in an enemy village then the spirit was bewitched and could not return to its body (1030). If the ndamup was not able to return to its body, the person died within a few days or was so weakened that when the conjuring village attacked, the people who lost their ndamup were the ones easily killed (1030). The danger of such black magic was even stated in a myth in which two heroes died because their ndamup had visited an enemy village and feasted on roast wild pig (1030).

The third animating force of the individual is ndat (Sowada 1990, 66). Ndat is an ancestral spirit caught in the continuous cycle of life, death and rebirth (66). The ndat of the ancestor has a protective power (67). An individual was not considered whole until the ndat joined the other animating forces (66). The ancestral spirit shares with the host individual its personality and skills (66). Without the inclusion of ndat in a person’s makeup, the individual did not live (70). Often when a child died, the Bismam believed that the ndat spirit had not joined the other animating forces, and the child was thus
incomplete and could not survive (70). An individual could increase his or her ancestral power by taking the name of another ancestor and over the course of a lifetime, several ancestors might be invoked to help (67).

**Protective Function of Shields and Ancestor Skulls**

In the days of headhunting, shields protected the owner from physical violence (Figure 6). The power of the shield was so respected that the Bismam believed it was preferable to have a shield than weapon (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 46). Even though, headhunting raids have stopped, shields are still considered powerful protective objects (Schneebaum 1990, 37).

Just as child is named after an ancestor to infuse him with the ndat spirit, the naming of inanimate objects such as shields, figures, and canoe prows after an ancestor also infuses the object with the ancestor’s ndat making the object function better (Sowada 1990, 67). A shield is named after an ancestor to instill the strength and courage of its namesake into the shield (Schneebaum 1990, 37). A shield inhabited by the ndat of the ancestor, made the ancestor seem alive to its owner (37). The owner of shield is thus stronger and more confident knowing that his ancestor’s power protects him (Sowada 1990, 67).

A large number of shields increases the power of the entire community and serves as a protective force (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 46). In addition, to protecting against physical enemies, shields have the power to ward off spiritual enemies and negative forces. Shields are brandished and carried to the river’s edge to frighten away the malevolent spirit that caused the death when someone dies unexpectedly (Smidt 1993, 71). Shields are placed in or near a doorway to protect a family home
against evil spirits entering the home when the family is not present (Schneebaum 1990, 37).

As the shield is inhabited by the *ndat* of an individual, the bodily remains of the deceased are also still inhabited by the *ndat* (Schneebaum 1990, 56). Thus, wearing the skull is believed to protect the living relative through the presence of the *ndat* (Figure 37, Figure 43 and Figure 51). The protective force of the skull, like the protective force of the shield, provides confidence and security to the person wearing the skull, especially knowing that the powerful *ndat* of the ancestor is definitely with him.

Ancestor skulls are also used as headrests specifically to keep the *ndamup* from wandering because of its own nature or in the days of headhunting, because the *ndamup* was lured away by enemies (Figure 61). When a woman inherited an ancestor skull, she was supposed to keep it covered in the rafters of her house (Schneebaum 1985, 146-47). In Figure 61, an ancestor skull is seen hanging behind the woman, and another ancestor skull is seen on the floor on the left side of the picture. Considering that shields were able to protect the family when positioned in the doorway, it can be surmised that physical contact was not always necessary to evoke the protective force of the *ndat* and that hanging the skull in the home protected the home as well.

**Protective Designs and Objects**

Shields are carved from the buttress root of the mangrove tree. Among the Bismam a three dimensional projection is carved at the top of the shield, a small figure, a head or an abstraction of either one (Figure 6) (Smidt 1993, 56). Shields are painted with red, white and black, the same colors used in body adornment. The front is carved with low relief designs (56). Both the figure on top of the shield and the designs on its front represent the ancestor that the shield is named after and refers to other ancestors as well.
(Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981, 43). In this way, the owner enlists the protection of many ancestors (Smidt 1993, 71).

Gerbrands documented the shield represented in figure 6 when he collected it from the village of Atjametsj in the early 1960s. The figure on top represents the owner’s dead sister. The low relief figures on the front depict two of the owner’s dead brothers and another dead sister (125).

On a shield with a similar motif collected in the village of Otsjanep at the same time (Figure 62) the figure on top is smaller and less defined, but the ancestors in relief on the front of the shield have more robust body forms. In these two examples, it can be suggested that the figure on top and the designs on the front visually reinforce for the owner that his “spirit family” was protecting him.

While the ancestor skull itself is the physical remains of an ancestor, it is also an assemblage created to be a portrait of that ancestor. If the multiple ancestor figures represented on the shield serve to remind the owner visually of the power of the ancestor contained within the shield, then the portrait created on the remains of the deceased must visually intensify the memory of that particular ndat, serving to remind the owner of the presence and protection of the ancestor within the skull.

Many shields have representations of bipane nose ornaments typically worn by powerful males for ceremonial events or, in the past during headhunting raids. The bipane adornment has metaphorical associations such as a boar’s tusk that weakens the enemy and as a cuscus tail that empowers the headhunter to become like his fruit eating brother. On the shield, this ornament was reduced to a simplified motif consisting of a basic c-shape (Figure 63).
The bipane nose ornament is a powerful and prestigious ornament both for the living and for the ancestor skull. The inclusion of the bipane ornament on an ancestor skull must create a visual statement that expresses not only the individuality of the deceased but also makes a statement about the powerfulness of ornament itself, especially as it relates to headhunting (Figure 2).

The Bismam believe that the ndat that the shield is named after, the ndats of the ancestors represented by the ancestor designs on the front of the shield, and the power that radiates from the symbols such as the bipane on the front of the shield work together to paralyze living enemies as well as spirit enemies (Schneebaum 1990, 37). Just as the shield could paralyze the enemy, the ancestor skull that possess the ndat of the ancestor, is visually constructed to remind the viewer of a portrait of the deceased and is adorned with powerful ornaments such as the bipane must also function to paralyze spiritual enemies.

**Communication**

Another function of the ancestor skull is as a tool for communication. A brief review of a two Bismam myths that involve a decapitated head allows the reader to realize that communication between the living and dead has precedence in Bismam cosmology. This section will explore how the jipae masquerade serves as a tool for the living and the dead to communicate. Finally, this section will compare the adornment of the jipae mask and the ancestor skull and will suggest that a pattern of adornment on both represents the ndat ancestral spirit.

**Myth of Talking Head**

Father Zegwaard provides insight into the practice of keeping the skull of a relative through his recording of two myths. Each myth features a disembodied head that
is able to talk. Warsekomen, a bigman in the village of Sjuru, told Father Zegwaard an important myth that explained the reasons behind headhunting.

There were two brothers. The senior was called Desoipitsj (deso-wound; ipitsj-man: man with wound) and the junior Biwiripitsj (biwir or bewor many colored parrot: parrot man). Because of his physical condition the elder brother had always to stay indoors and the younger had to go out to support him. One day, returning from a hunting trip, Biwiripitsj brought home a pig. He cut off the head and thrust a dagger into the throat so that the point came out through the neck. The dagger was a sharpened cassowary thighbone. With the point of the dagger Biwiripitsj pinned the head of the pig to the floor of the hut, which was covered with bark. The elder brother had been watching and after some time remarked: “Bah, a pig’s head is but a pig’s head. Why not replace it with a human head? That would be something, I think.” But the younger brother didn’t like the idea at all. “What are you talking about? Besides, where could I get a human head?” (The story presupposes that just the two brothers are around.) The older brother insisted, and proposed: “Well, you can have my head.” But the younger wouldn’t hear of this and refused emphatically. However, Desoipitsj continued to argue and in the end succeeded in persuading his younger brother. Biwiripitsj thereupon killed Desoipitsj with a spear, cut into the throat with a bamboo knife as far as he could, and pressed the head forward until the vertebrae of the neck cracked. He then removed the head from the body. The loose head, however, was able to speak and it gave instruction to Biwiripitsj, who obediently executed the orders given by it. (Zegwaard 1959, 1021)

The myth continues with the head of Desoipitsj explaining to Biwiripitsj many ritual tasks such as the proper way to cut his own body and distribute the pieces. The head also instructs the correct way to greet a war party returning from a headhunting raid and the appropriate manner to carry out complex initiation rituals.

The significance of the story is Desoipitsj’s ability to continue to speak after his death. There can be no mistake that the character is truly dead. The description of his decapitation is quite vivid, including the crack of the vertebrae. Such attention to detail is obviously intended to relate the body of Desoipitsj that of an actual human. One could suggest that these are supernatural beings; however, no mention is made of any special powers except that Desoipitsj and Biwiripitsj are the only people. The myth suggests that
the Bismam are familiar with the concept that disembodied heads communicate with the living.

While examining this myth, a few other points to note are listed as follows:
Biwiripitsj is known as parrot man, a human head replaces a pig’s head, and a bamboo knife is used to decapitate the victim. The headhunter is metaphorically compared to animals that eat fruit including, parrots, cockatoos and wild boar. Men and women adorn themselves with cockatoo feathers in their hair. The wild boar’s tusks are used as a pendant or worn around the arm. Men wear the *bipane* shell nose ornament which can be read as pig tusks. The bamboo knife used to decapitate a victim is linked to the bamboo pendant worn by headhunters.

The second myth, collected by Father Zegwaard, told the story of a head that provides instruction for headhunting activities. The myth is contained in a song sung at a festival for a new men’s house.

Biwiripitsj (this name appears in many mythological stories) went with his wife and children to the river Fait to pound sago. Near the mouth of the river he felled a palm that was in full flower...Biwiripitsj then called his son and ordered him to lie prostrate on the bare trunk of the tree. The boy did so. The father [according to some versions the mother] took a sago pounder and struck the boy’s neck with force. The head, decorated with hair lengthenings, was separated from the body and with a few jumps landed in a *jimemmut* tree, where it became entangled by the hair. Blood from the head trickled down the trunk. The chin pointed upward and the hair lengthenings hung down. The father [or mother] struck again and again with the pounder and smashed the body. Blood and flesh were entirely mixed with the pith of the sago palm, and the entrails splashed high into the surrounding trees. When the mother began to work the pith, it proved to be very easy to knead. She rejoiced and said: “Before it was very hard to knead sago and wring it out, now it’s extremely easy.” The son, however, was not completely dead, for the head began to talk. He taught his father the songs that have to be sung at the decapitation festivities: the songs on the way home from a raid, at the arrival in the village, when shaking out the brains, and so on. (Zegwaard 1959, 1027 -1028)

In both stories, the person’s decapitated head continues to converse with the living, giving instruction about traditions and rituals that need to be performed. Like the
previous myth, this one illustrates the belief that a decapitated head is an important tool for communicating with the dead and explaining ritual practices.

**Communicative Function of Jipae Masks and Ancestor Skulls**

Every two to three years, the *jipae* masquerade invites the recently deceased to return to the village before they complete the final leg of the migration to *safan* (Zegwaard 1993, 33). The *jipae* masquerade consists of two types of mask, the clown mask and the spirit mask (Eyde 1967, 338). In Figure 13, the clown mask is on the left and the two spirit masks are on the right. The *jipae* masks represent the spirits of those who have died since the last masquerade.

Deciding who would be represented by the mask is discussed at length in the men’s house (Zegwaard 1993, 33). Great quantities of food are provided for those who create the mask, those who wear the mask, the alternate wearers, and the guests of the ceremony (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 220-221). Zegwaard reports that “…politics and rivalry between family groups plays an important role in these decisions” (Zegwaard 1993, 33). One can surmise that the *tesumajipic* of the *yeu* are the only ones who would have enough resources to provide the amounts of food necessary for the ceremony. Who would fund the ceremony may thus be a matter of prestige. Recently deceased bigmen and bigwomen are represented by the masks, but other recently deceased villagers who are not represented by a mask would be moved to migrate by the power of the ceremony (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 220-221).

The first character to appear in the masquerade is referred to as the orphan boy mask. He is teased and harassed for a couple days within the village by all, especially young boys. The orphan boy mask appears for about two days during which the atmosphere of the masquerade is jovial and light (Zegwaard 1993, 39). As sunset
approaches on the second day, the other characters called *jipae* appear at the edge of the forest (37). Even though these masks represent spirits of the dead, the mood of the ritual remains cheerful (40). The masks walk through the village with the villagers following. The group stops at each former home of the deceased persons who are represented by the masks. The mask is greeted by living family members (38). The relatives briefly reenter a state of mourning, and the family members asked the spirit many questions about its welfare. They assure the deceased that although they are missed, they are no longer needed in the village because other people in the community have taken their places (36-37). Finally, the family member gives the spirit food, typically the sago larvae delicacy (38). After visiting the homes of the deceased, the group then moves to the *yeu*, for dancing, mock battles and food exchanges (38). When the sun comes up, the masks walk back to the forest (38).

The *jipae* masquerade allows the living to communicate with its deceased relatives while in the *ndamir* realm just before the spirit crosses to *safan*. The *ndat* spirit crosses over into *safan* and can then be called upon to add strength to a shield. The *ndat* spirit is also the protective force in the ancestor skull.

Father Sowada states that the *jipae* visit, “…brings about the concomitant proof that ancestral assistance and powers will be continuously forthcoming” (Sowada 1990, 69). He does not state directly the role of the ancestor skull has in this “ancestral assistance and power.” One can logically assume that the ancestor skull, which is decorated to represent the ancestor and used as a protective device, also functions like the *jipae* mask to reinforce to the living relative that a particular dead relative who is in *safan* is ready to help. The closeness with which the skull is handled by the living and the
portrait that reminds the viewer of the individual suggests that the living could easily communicate with the dead through the adorned ancestor skull.

**Adornment of Jipae Mask and Ancestor Skull**

The *jipae* costume is made of twined rope created by the men in the yeu from a sacred bark used only for this purpose (Zegwaard, 1993, 34). The face and upper torso of the wearer are covered by the knitted fiber and a thick fringe of sago strips hang from the arms and the waist of the costume, giving it a flowing movement (34). Wooden pieces carved to resemble bird bills or shells are attached to create the eyes of the mask (34-35).

The decoration of the skull and mask share a few visual similarities. Like the ancestor skull, the mask was given a nose ornament. Compare the ancestor skull in Figure 2 and the *jipae* mask in Figure 64 and Figure 65. Compare also, the nose ornament of the *jipae* mask in Figure 68 with nose ornament of the ancestor skull in Figure 55. The *jipae* mask is adorned with white cockatoo feathers, and beaded netting connects the feathers to the stick. A similar combination of the seeds, netting and white cockatoo feathers are used for the ancestor skull’s headdress as seen in Figure 67 when comparing the ancestor skull worn by the person on the left with the *jipae* mask standing next to him. The *jipae* mask is painted with alternating red and white colors that follow ridges created by the knotted fibers. The same colors are found on the ancestor skull in the red and white seeds that fill the eye and nose cavities (Figure 67).

The *jipae* mask and the ancestor skull are both inhabited by the *ndat* ancestral spirit. The repeated use of materials, such as the nose ornament, white cockatoo feathers, red and white colors in the *jipae* and in the decorated skull suggests a similar manner for depicting the specific *ndat* ancestral spirit.
Conclusion

For the Bismam, adornment is a means through which the individual proclaimed his skills and status. Among the living, dressing for a ceremonial occasion allowed one to wear a number of elements including many of the following: fiber ornaments, necklaces, nose ornaments, earrings, headdresses, and body paint.

An ancestor’s skull was acquired when an individual from the community died of disease or old age. The skull assemblage is created by some of the same elements worn by the living Bismam such as a nose ornaments, earrings, and headdresses. The ancestor skull is a remnant of a particular individual and the individuality of the deceased is made evident in the skull construction through the personal and distinctive ornaments used to define the skull.

When dressing for ceremonial occasions, individuals wanted to dress in the mode of a headhunter, the most respected member of the community. Material that suggested headhunting included: cuscus fur, white cockatoo feathers, white hornbill feathers, black cassowary feathers, spiral cut shell, boar bone, boar tusks, red color, black color, white color, bamboo plates, and human bone.

The adorned ancestor skull is given to a family member and became his personal property. Social status is indicated by possessing the skull because the “most important” relative keeps the skull. A male family member of the deceased is allowed to wear the decorated skull; female family members are not. The way in which the ancestor skull is worn is an indicator of the prestige of the individual who owned it. Males of high status, or bigmen, are allowed to wear the skulls on their chests, while men of lower status are required to wear the skulls on their backs.
In the past, shields physically protected the warrior who carried it from arrows, spears and daggers. However, the real power of the shield is revealed by its decoration which depicted relatives who have reached the ancestral realm. These ancestors increase the effectiveness of the shield against both physical and spiritual enemies. The same is true for the power of the ancestor skull. It is able to protect the wearer from spiritual enemies and represents a relative who has reached the ancestral realm. When used as a headrest, it is able to protect the sleeper from the negative of effect of the ndamup spirit roaming around. An ancestor skull is hung in the family home or stored in the rafters and is able to protect the home from malicious spiritual enemies who might enter the family abode. The bipane designs carved on the shield and the bipane nose ornament on the ancestor skull symbolically represent the headhunter and imbue the object with even greater power.

Ancestor skulls were purposely decorated to resemble headhunters. The ancestor skull incorporated a headdress of beads and shells with typically white feathers, a nose ornament of shell or bone, and from the color palette of body paint, red and white beads. While headhunters were considered the most highly regarded living members of the community, dead headhunters were considered the most powerful and influential ancestors in the spirit world. Personal ornaments used to define the ancestor skull assemblage served to create a portrait of an individual, the patterns of the decorations as well as the power associated with those objects created a symbolic portrait of ‘headhunter’ as well.

Finally, the skull is a means to communicate with the ancestor realm. The skull is a physical embodiment of the ndat ancestral spirit as is the jipae mask during the
ceremonial masquerade. Like the appearance of jipae masks, the sight of the ancestor skull assemblage reassures the owner that a relative is in the ancestral realm and could be counted on for protection and assistance at any time. Furthermore, the way the jipae mask is decorated is similar to the way the ancestor skull is decorated with a nose ornament, white cockatoo feathers, red colors and white colors. This similarity of adornment indicates a pattern for depicting the ndat ancestral spirit. Furthermore, the ancestor skull as a representative of one ancestral spirit may have also served to remind the viewer of the entire realm of the ancestors.

Therefore, an adorned ancestor skull symbolically and simultaneously represented a particular individual, a headhunter, and an ancestor.
CHAPTER 4
TROPHY SKULLS

This chapter examines the adorned and displayed trophy skull. Trophy skulls were the remains of enemies that had been killed in headhunting raids, butchered, and cleaned. As seen in Figure 68, these skulls are identified by the hole in the side of the skull where the brains were removed. Headhunting is no longer practiced by the Bismam; therefore, this analysis examines the role these objects had in the past. The rituals described in this section are practiced today but in an altered state conforming to the demands of the Indonesian government and the conversion to Christianity.

This chapter begins with an explanation of revenge, one type of reciprocity. To understand how the trophy skull is obtained, the actual headhunting raid is briefly reviewed along with the processing of the corpse to produce the trophy skull and other trophies. Once the trophy skull was acquired, it became part of one or more visual configurations.

The first assemblage of trophy skulls discussed is directly linked to revenge and the headhunting raid. The *bis* ritual, a ceremony to honor the recently deceased, displayed trophy skulls attached to a *bis* pole. This display was a visual statement that revenge had been achieved.

The second section looks briefly at Bismam ideas of growth and health. The section reviews the initiation ritual that is believed to stimulate growth in young boys changing them into adults. The decoration of the initiate is examined especially as it relates to the adornment of men, women, and headhunters. Next a brief note about the adornment of
the trophy skull is analyzed comparing it with the adornment of an ancestor skull. Finally, I review the display of the adorned trophy skull in the initiation ritual. In this ritual, the adornment of the trophy skull makes a visual statement of individuality that enhances the ritual function of the skull. The display of the adorned skull reminds the viewer of the adult role the initiate will be assuming.

The last section looks at the assemblage of trophy skulls known as a *kus fe*. This section will first examine the most prestigious member of the Bismam community, the *tesumajipic*. This individual has a great deal of power and prestige within the community’s social structure. The *kus fe* is displayed in two buildings-- the men’s house and the family home-- and, it can be displayed in different locations in each these buildings. Each place that it is displayed allows the assemblage to be viewed by different members of the community. The *kus fe* is a visual statement of its owner’s skills as a warrior and his social status.

**Reciprocity and Revenge**

In anthropological terms, reciprocity is the mutual exchange of goods between parties who are related by family or who live in the same community (Bohannan 1992, 125). This definition is applicable to many social activities in the Bismam community. Mutual exchanges of food, sago and fish, are a common forms of reciprocity. Giving food, especially sago, is a way to express friendship, and the mutual giving of food establishes and reinforces bonds of friendship and family. For the Bismam, gift-giving obligates the receiver to the giver until a gift or service of equal value is given back (Sowada 1961, 50). The Bismam believe that equivalence creates compatibility (Sowada 1990, 69).
Marriage is also a form of reciprocity between families, especially if each family has a daughter to “give away” (Fleischhacker 1991, 6). An assortment of pre-negotiated goods, or bride-wealth, is exchanged if an equivalent daughter is not available. Papisj or wife exchange is also a form of reciprocity between two men. This exchange cements the men’s relationship and encourages partnership in endeavors such as warfare. Even pregnancy is seen as an exchange of spirit forces between the realm of the living and that of the ancestors (Fleischhacker 1991, 6).

In the past, reciprocity was also evident in “blood-wealth exchange.” This exchange occurred between members of the same yeu, between yeus in the same village and sometimes between closely related villages (Sowada 1961, 54-55). Eyde told the story of a non-lethal dispute and subsequent exchange that occurred in the village of Amanamkai where there were three men’s houses (Eyde 1967, 325). Tiwankasci trespassed onto territory that belonged to Macamos’ extended family and was fishing there when Macamos discovered him (325). Macamos was so enraged by this violation that he took his digging stick and hit Tiwankasci on the forehead, causing excessive bleeding (325). When the two men returned to the village, the men of Tiwankasci’s yeu gathered up arms and proceeded to the yeu of Macamos’ group. A brawl broke out between the two groups, and eventually leaders from both men’s houses met in a third men’s house that was neutral in the altercation (325). After deliberations, a payment of a “...stone axe, a bone dagger, a bundle of cassowary feathers, a bundle of arrows, and a lance” was agreed upon to compensate Tiwankasci for his loss of blood (328). The initial offense of trespassing was considered in this payment, but shedding blood was the more grievous offense; therefore, Macamos had to pay (332).
Altercations such as that described above were commonplace among the Bismam (332). Family members and yeu members resorted to means ranging from wrestling to battle to settle such disputes, and people not as well connected often threatened each other with weapons and exchanged blows with digging sticks or palm fronds (332). Once calm was established, food exchanges often resolved the dispute and returned the relationships to more cordial terms (332).

If the fight became so intense that someone was killed, then the person responsible for the death and his family had to compensate the victim’s family (Sowada 1961, 53-54). The killer could not approach the grieving family for fear of revenge, so members of his yeu arranged the terms of the gift exchange and arranged a gift-giving ceremony (54). In this exchange, the killer remained concealed within the men’s house. He handed goods over to members of his own family who were inside the yeu, and they in turn passed the gifts of “…sago, spears, shells, dogs teeth, paddles, etc…” to the victim’s family, who waited outside the yeu (54-55). As a final gesture of good will, the grieving family adopted a member of the offender’s yeu and addressed him by the name of the deceased (55).

In this larger system of reciprocity, headhunting was an exchange that usually took place between villages that were not closely related. Ideally, headhunters would only seek the number of victims equal to those they themselves had lost when they had been victimized; headhunting was deemed necessary to maintain ideal balance within the cosmos (Fleischhacker 1991, 6). In spite of the ideal of balance, Eyde reported on one occasion that the village of Amanamkai collected twenty heads in revenge for the death of one of its members (Eyde 1967, 77). Furthermore, Eyde noted that, the village of
Amanamkai had been able to weaken its opponents by repeatedly attacking small groups as they gathered sago or fished (82). A few large headhunting raids against the weakened villages insured that they would dismantle and move, thus allowing Amanamkai to claim their sago and fishing territories (82).

Feelings of revenge motivate the spirit community as well as the living community. Bismam cosmology maintains that when someone dies, their ndat spirit remains in the intermediate plane known as ndamir, a limbo realm, until their death are properly remembered through ritual or, in the past, revenge (Fleishchaker 1991, 12). Furthermore, the Bismam consider any death except that of the very young or the very old to be caused by malevolent actions of an enemy, either through physical aggression, such as warfare, or through the supernatural manipulation of a person’s lifeforce (Smidt 1993, 19). Common illnesses such as malaria, pneumonia, infections and parasites cause many deaths, and even these are suspected of being the result of black magic (Fleischhacker 1991, 12).

The spirits of individuals who died from decapitation were believed to be especially dangerous (Zegwaard 1959, 1029). In ndamir, these spirits could be harmful to the living, but once established in safan, they, like other recently deceased spirits, were considered helpful to the living community. Every effort was thus made to seek revenge so that the spirit of the decapitated could migrate into safan. The Bismam believed that all spirits desire to move to safan because from there they can be reborn. The living also want the ancestral spirit to move to safan because from that vantage they can be persuaded to inhabit many items, thus causing the item to improve its function or become protective.
Headhunting Raid

Headhunting raids were orchestrated events that accompanied larger ceremonies, including the completion of a men’s house, the *bis* ritual and the initiation ritual (Zegwaard 1959, 1028). Because of the time, resources and people necessary for a large raid, they seldom occurred (1032). Planned raids involved at least one yeu but more frequently all the yeus of the village would be involved (Eyde 1967, 276). Some villages were able to form a pact with a neighboring village to conduct a raid together (280). The pact also kept the two villages from preying upon one another (280). However, the Bismam often took advantage of unexpected opportunities such as a lost stranger or even a welcomed guest (Zegwaard 1959, 1032). Lying in wait for a victim who was gathering sago or fishing was a favored means to acquire a head (Eyde 1967, 71).

Before a headhunting raid, the enemies’ lifeforces were attacked with black magic during the *eram asan* ceremony, which was designed to assault the *ndamup* lifeforce of the enemy (Zegwaard 1959, 1030). A “magical” pole was smeared with a secret substance known only to the specialist performing the ceremony (1030). A leader of the men’s house dipped the pole into a fire causing the substance to smoke and to emit an intense smell (1030). The smell was designed to lure the enemy’s *ndamup* from his sleeping body. If the spirit “ate the smell” the living person would die or be easier to kill in battle (1030).

Another pre-headhunting raid ceremony was the *fo mbufum*, in which men who have vowed revenge rowed a canoe near a village upon whom a revenge raid had been planned (1031). They fed the *ndat* of the ancestor who demanded revenge by dropping food in the river (1031). Then, they unveiled the canoe’s new prow which
commemorated the dead relative (1031). This ritual was a warning to the enemy village that a revenge raid would soon happen (1031).

A planned raid was begun before dawn with several canoes quietly gliding toward the pre-selected village. Each family group that had a fireplace within the yeu rode in the same canoe together (Eyde 1967, 276). As the canoes maneuvered up the river they maintained the same organizational groupings that they had in the yeu; therefore, upstream and downstream halves of the yeu rode next to each other in the canoes (277). Once the warriors were as close as possible without being seen, they left their canoes and continued on foot surrounding the village (Zegwaard 1959, 1035). The battle position of an individual warrior was based on his age and experience (1035). Older men were the advisors, middle-aged men served as the bow men, and young men became the infantry (1035). The attack began with a bamboo horn blast and a shouting exchange designed to panic the sleeping village (1035). Startled by the commotion, the frightened villagers ran out of their houses (1035). Archers fired upon the fleeing people driving them toward the foot soldiers, who stood ready to kill or overpower their victims (1035). Women and children attempted to escape via the jungle or river with limited success (1036). Sometimes the attackers captured women and children to add to their own families, but they were also hunted (1036). The element of surprise was fleeting so that, while men of the village could run away, many stood their ground (1036). The raiders had a limited advantage because most of the fighting was hand to hand combat with shields, spears, and daggers (1036). For the young men, a kill was a means to establish themselves as headhunters and to claim the rewards of that title (1036). They competed with the more experienced warriors who wanted a kill to increase their prestige (1036). If the battle was
heated the victim was killed immediately and the head was removed (1036). The end of the battle was signaled with another blow from the bamboo horn (1036).

If time and circumstances allowed, the victim was beaten, with the head receiving the most abuse (1036). The victim was not considered a person but a head. Zegwaard reported that the victor proclaimed, “My head, my head won in a raid” (1036). If the victim’s name was unknown to the raiders, intimidation and beating were used to learn the name, which was vital for future initiation ceremonies (1036). However, because of the close proximity of villages, trading, visiting and even marriages took place across village boundaries. Thus, the name of the victim may well have been known to the raiders (Eyde 1967, 75). The captive’s arms were bound to a long pole placed across his chest, and he was placed in a canoe (Zegwaard 1959, 1036). At sacred points in the river, such as at bends or at the junction of two streams, the victims were killed and beheaded (1036). Zegwaard reported that “The beheading is done by persons with special skill for it…” (1037). Eyde noted that “The beheaders of the victims are sometimes the wives of the headhunters. This is one way in which a great warrior, tesumajipic, enables his wife also to become tesumaj, great” (Edye 1967, 74). If the body was to be used in the initiation ceremony, then some of the victim’s blood was gathered in a shell (Zegwaard 1959, 1023). The hunters left a personal item of the victim’s such as a necklace, skirt, hair or body part, so that the victim’s family would discover the fate of their loved one (1036-1037). Father Zegwaard witnessed one of these personal items: “On one occasion I saw a sign composed of an arrowpoint, a red fruit, and some hair of the victim” (1037). He also noted one example where the victim’s intestine was hung across the river (1037).
On the journey back to their own village, the headhunters sang a ritual song (1022). As they neared the village, the raiders blew the bamboo horn to announce their victory. In a prescribed dialogue, the villagers asked the raiders if they had succeeded. After a positive response, which included the victim’s name, the women, who were dressed in ceremonial attire, began dancing and singing (1022).

Cannibalism

Once at the village, the victim’s body was ritually butchered as prescribed by mythology. Father Zegwaard collected a very detailed description of the butchering of a human within the context of a myth.

To begin with, the head of Desoipitsj taught Biwiripitsj the technique of butchering (nao). He was told to make a deep cut with a bamboo knife from the anus to the neck in such manner that the cut went through one side of the trunk to the armpit and from there went by the collar bone to the throat. He was instructed to make a similar cut on the other side, but now from top to bottom. Through these openings he had to break the ribs with a sharpened palmwood stick (om) or with a stone ax (si). Then he put his hand underneath the chest, which could now be lifted easily and put aside. Arms and legs were first loosened, then cut off. Now Biwiripitsj took the entrails as in a bundle and removed them from the backbone with a vigorous jerk. Only the backside remained. The various parts, including the entrails, were placed in the fire and roasted. The upper part of the body and the arms were at once ready for consumption, but the lower part and the thighs had to be mixed with sago (a starch prepared from the pith of the sago palm) which had to be made in the form of long sticks, whereupon these too could be eaten. (1021)

Father Zegwaard noted that his informant, Warsekomen, mixed the mythological elements with the realistic elements. This detailed description of the butchering seems to reinforce the realism of cannibalism. It was evident from this description that almost every part of the victim was used. Eyeballs and genitals, considered inedible, were ritually disposed of (1024). However, most of the body was edible and the flesh was distributed to the community (1027). The family and friends of the warrior who had
defeated the victim received the best portions; yet, taboos prevented the warrior himself from eating the victim’s flesh (Schneebaum 1990, 53).

Kathleen Van Arsdale noted that the victim’s personality was believed to be contained in his flesh and these characteristics were considered transferred through consumption (Arsdale, K. 1978, 46). Smidt stated that the victim’s power was contained in the brains (Smidt 1993, 20). Zegwaard noted that the head contained “germinative power” that was transferable to humans and sago palms (Zegwaard 1959, 1039). The lifeforces, yuwus, ndamup, and ndat, although not explicitly stated by these scholars as being consumed, are the forces that animate the human, giving them personality, power and fertility. Zegwaard stated that cannibalism was not the goal of the headhunting raid but merely one part of the event (1020). However, the protein value of human meat could be a factor, as Peter Van Arsdale pointed out, “…that despite non-nutritional intents it constituted a significant dietary contribution” (Arsdale, P. 1978, 50). He goes on to say that human meat was nutritionally similar to pig meat (50). He also theorized that when headhunting was at it peak during and after World War II; it was possible for a group of one hundred to consume five to ten victims per year, providing most of their protein needs (50). The victim’s flesh was thus both nutritionally and spiritually rich.

The Use of Skeletal Remains

The femur, mandible, vertebrae and skull of the victim were saved as well and became trophies. Dogs were given the other bones (Zegwaard 1959, 1027). Cassowary femur bones, crocodile jaw bones and human thigh bones were used to make daggers. Cassowary daggers were the most common, but crocodile bone daggers and the human femur were the most valued of these bone tools, and only headhunters had the privilege to own these daggers (Eyde 1967, 70). The head and upper portion of the femur was
reduced to a sharpened point with barbs and liner designs while the condyles of the femur were covered with a fiber net (Figure 69). Strings of coix and abrus seeds with attachments of cassowary feathers were anchored to the net creating an ornate object. Daggers were worn in a braided rattan arm band as part of the attire of a headhunter (Figure 36 and Figure 43) (Zegwaard 1959, 1023). Display of the weapon made a public statement of the hunter’s status.

In the process of preparing the trophy skull, the mandible was “thrown outside” (1024). Boys or women, who had participated in the initiation ritual, often salvaged the mandible to use as the pendant of a necklace (1024). In Figure 70, the mandibles are attached to cassowary quills with fiber. For the wearer, this display may be a statement to the community of vicariously achieved status. For the headhunter, who made the kill, it may be a statement of his ability to attract followers, emphasizing his own prestige.

The atlas vertebra was also used as a pendant, typically worn by the headhunter himself. The necklace in Figure 71 was made from the atlas vertebra of the victim and decorated with coix seeds, abrus seeds, small shells and quills. In this case, the wearing of this trophy was a public statement of the headhunter’s prowess.

The Use of the Parts of the Head

As the most highly prized trophy, the head of the victim was removed from the body and taken to the men’s house for processing. In a continuation of the headhunting myth of Biwiripitsj and Desoipitsj, the treatment of the skull for use in the initiation ritual was explained.

In the evening the head should be roasted; during the night it should be kept on some sort of loft; and in the morning it should be scalped…The treating of the head of the victim was again to be the function of the mother’s oldest brother. The next morning the head was to be taken down from the loft and the nose-skin was to be taken off first. The jaws had to be removed. The brothers of the initiate’s mother
worked in turns according to their age. While cutting and carving they would comment on the victim’s past action; for example, while taking the skin off the mouth one would say: “Yesterday this mouth ate fish on the bank of the river; today it is dead.” (Zegwaard 1959, 1023-1024)

The nose skin and part of the upper lip of the victim was stretched over a bamboo plate. The ornament was used in the initiation ceremony (1023). The skull was roasted again and then it was struck on the parietal plate with a star-shaped stone axe; Figure 68 clearly shows the hole left from the axe (1024). The brains were removed and placed in a sacred container made of sago palm leaves (1024). The brains were mixed with sago and eaten by older men of the village at a special midnight ritual (1024). After the brains were removed, the trophy skull was prepared in two ways, either becoming part of an assemblage, or if the headhunting raid was part of the initiation ritual, being decorated.

**Bis Ritual**

In spite of the fact that the Bismam no longer conduct revenge headhunts for the ancestors, they still perform the *bis* ritual to honor the ancestors. After a death, the deceased’s family begins the process of accumulating resources and bigmen begin the intensive planning of a *bis* festival cycle, a process that takes years. More than one person is remembered in the *bis* ritual and families combine their resources to host the event. There are two types of poles: one used for the *bis* ritual and one used as support for the men’s house (Figure 72 and Figure 73) (Kuruwaip 1982, 13). For the ritual, several poles are made (Schneebaum 1990, 42). For the construction of a new *yeu* a minimum of four poles are made for the central fireplace but as many as twenty are possible for all the fireplaces (Rockefeller 1967, 37). *Bis* poles used for the ritual are twenty-five to thirty-five feet high (Sowada 1961, 47).
When the *bis* ceremony draws near, a hunting party goes into the forest and selects the best mangrove trees (Schneebaum 1990, 42). The mangrove tree is characterized by the plank roots that flare out at the base of the tree. The foray into the forest is conducted in a similar manner to a headhunting raid with the warriors in ceremonial dress stalking and attacking the trees (Smidt 1993, 23). The mangrove tree has red sap so that as the tree is cut it seems to bleed, heightening the metaphor between man and tree (Rockefeller 1967, 34). As the tree is chopped down, one of the planks is retained. When the warriors return to the community, they are greeted with the same ritual greeting and bamboo horn blowing used for a successful headhunting raid (Smidt 1993, 23).

Next, the logs are taken to the clearing in front of the yeu where carvers commissioned by the organizers of the *bis* ritual begin roughing out images and designs (Smidt 1993, 23). The pole is carved upside down with the plank projection at the top of the pole. Once the major forms are carved, the poles are moved to a special room in the yeu where the carving is refined (Rockefeller 1967, 34). During this time, the carvers are fed by the family who sponsored the pole (Sowada 1961, 48). Relatives of the decease designate a brother-in-law to assist the carver (Eyde 1967, 201). He is responsible for removing woodchips, coating the pole with lime to keep it from drying too quickly, covering the pole at night with palm fronds and guarding the pole at all times (201). Poles take several weeks to carve (Rockefeller 1967, 34).

The pole has three main parts the top is the projection, the middle has large stacked figures, and the bottom usually has a canoe form. The plank root of the mangrove becomes a projection, known as the penis or *tjemen* of the pole (Figure 72). It is carved in an openwork style. Designs carved into the poles especially in the projection are related
to headhunting symbols such as the hornbill, cuscus, praying mantis, bipane nose shell, and head of cockatoo (Schneebaum 1990, 42). The large stacked figures in the middle of the pole represent the recently deceased relatives who are to be commemorated in the ritual (Schneebaum 1990, 42). According to Eyde, these figures represent a couple who are the parents or grandparents of the person sponsoring the pole (Eyde 1967, 201). At the bottom of the pole a miniature canoe is often carved, known as the jifoj. It symbolized the soul’s journey across the sea toward safan (347).

The pole shown in Figure 72 was collected in 1961 from the village of Otsjanep on the Casuarina Coast. At the tip of the projection of the pole, an ancestor figure is depicted in a seated position. In the openwork of the projection another figure sits below the figure at the top of the projection in a seated position facing the opposite direction. The s-shape representing the cuscus tail can be seen in the tjemen of the pole in Figure 72 and is repeated several times. This bis pole has two stacked male figures, but the relationship of the figures to the sponsor of the pole was not documented. Both figures have marks on the arms and legs that may represent scarification or body paint. The middle figure holds a triton shell, an ornament reserved for bigmen. A canoe with two small figures occupies the bottom portion of the pole. At the base of the canoe, arms and legs of a figure are depicted in low relief on the side. The head of the canoe figure sticks out three dimensionally serving as the stern of the canoe.

The bis pole in the row of bis poles shown Figure 73 was photographed in the interior of a men’s house in Amanamkai in 1961. In the tjeman of the pole repeated hornbill beaks are easily identified by the beak ridges along the base of the projection. Several cuscus s-shapes are also found in the openwork of this projection. The figures on
this pole represent an ancestral couple as Eyde suggested. The top figure is Bwarim and below him is his wife Seji. The pole was carved by Matjemos and used for the central fireplace of the yeu Amman.

The *bis* pole in Figure 5 was collected in 1922, and no documentation was recorded about who the figures represented, who carved the pole or where the pole was displayed. In the openwork projection of the pole, one can see a two dimensional figure at the base of the projection. The *tjeman* of this pole is broken at the top. The main body of the pole features one large figure with three subsidiary figures. One subsidiary figure in at the main figure’s feet, one is at its’ abdomen in and upside down position and one is on the main figure’s head. Typically the head of a stacked figure is carved on the top of the main part of the pole, but in this case a bird’s head is carved at the top of the pole. The base of this pole has been altered from its original form.

For the *bis* ritual, when the carving is completed, the poles are erected in the clearing in front of the *yeu* and the actual ceremony began with drumming, mock battles, dancing, singing and feasting (Smidt 1993, 25). In the central Asmat region, poles are displayed vertically on scaffolding, but along the coast, poles are placed at an angle on scaffolding. This difference can be seen when comparing the poles displayed in Figure 74 with those displayed in Figure 75. In either case, the projection of the pole is supposed to point toward, *safan* (Gerbrands 1967, 25).

If the poles are carved for the interior of the men’s house, they are placed vertically with the *tjemen* supporting a horizontal post (146). Sometimes interior *bis* poles are used in a more symbolic function and placed next to supporting post (146).
In the past, the end of the *bis* festival was followed by a headhunting raid on the offending community (Schneebaum 1990, 44). If successful, trophy heads were brought back. Eyde reported that, “… the head was carried to the small wooden “canoe,” *jifoj*, at the base of the *mis* [*bis*] pole before it was taken to the central fireplace to be pinned down with a bone dagger” (Eyde 1967, 347). Part of the corpse or the entire corpse, depending on the size of the canoe, was temporarily placed in the canoe (Eyde 1967, 347). Then, the body was butchered and parceled out to the guests of the ritual and the members of the *yeu*. The victim’s blood was spread on the canoe and fat was rubbed into the pole. The placement of the flesh in the canoe, allowed the *ndat*, ancestral spirits of the pole, to take this “food” with them into *safan* (Eyde 1967, 347).

**Bis Display**

In Figure 5 a *bis* pole with skulls attached serves as documentation that trophy skulls were publicly displayed in the *bis* ritual. This pole is twelve feet five inches high and was collected in 1922 by Paul Wirz, two decades before any permanent contact was established between Europeans and the Bismam (Kaeppler, Kaufmann and Newton 1997, 513). Whether this pole was part of a *bis* ritual or from the interior of a *yeu* was not documented. Although one cannot see the holes on the sides of these skulls, they can be identified as trophy skulls because the mandibles are not attached to them.

The *bis* pole serves as a focal point of communication between the living and dead (Smidt 1993, 25). Once placed in front of the *yeu*, it is a public pledge to deceased members of the village that they are not forgotten and, in the past that their death would soon be avenged (25). It can be surmised that the purpose of displaying a trophy skull on a *bis* pole was to show the *ndat* spirit that revenge had been carried out in its honor and this in turn would placate the spirit and begin to establish a positive dialogue between the
living and the dead. Thus, the skulls on the *bis* pole were a symbol of debts paid and implied future prosperity.

The idea that human heads are equivalent to tree fruit is based on the creation myth in which Fumeripitsj carved human figures from wood and brought them to life by drumming. This idea is stretched into a metaphor equating human body parts to tree parts. The most important aspect of this metaphor is that the human head is equivalent to the fruit. Therefore, the trophy skulls are understood to be “human fruit.” The assemblage created by purposefully attaching the skulls to the projection suggests a tree with fruit hanging from a branch. This is easily seen when comparing hanging skulls in Figure 5 and the hanging coconuts in Figure 17 and hanging jack fruit in Figure 19.

More than one figure would be included on the pole and more than one pole would be carved. Each figure carved on the pole represents a named ancestor; thus, infusing the pole with multiple *ndats* making it more powerful. The pole in Figure 5 has five ancestor figures, that in Figure 72 has seven figures, and that in Figure 73 has two ancestor figures. To have an ancestor represented on a pole is an honor, and accumulating enough wealth to feed the carver and ritual participants is prestigious (Sowada 1961, 48). Therefore, for the owner of the pole, the *bis* pole is a statement of their honorable lineage and their status within the community.

A successful headhunting raid was a show of the unity, resources and power of the *yeu*. As a product of the raid the trophy skull also represented the strength of the *yeu* to organize and execute the headhunting raid as well as the strength of the warriors who acquired the skulls. Together the assemblage of trophy skulls and the multiple figures on
the bis poles proclaimed the power of the living community and the power of the ancestor community.

The placement of the bis pole in the public courtyard allowed this assemblage to be seen by the members of the yeu, members of the village, guests from other villages, anyone passing by on the river, and those in the ancestral realm. These viewers would have immediately understood all the visual statements made by this assemblage of skulls and pole. The placement of this assemblage within the yeu would still have allowed the pole and skulls to be glimpsed by these same groups of viewers because the doors to the yeu remained open in the daylight. However, it would have been a more blatant visual statement to the members of the yeu, guests of the yeu and the ancestors that inhabit the yeu.

Growth

In the early 1950s when Father Zegwaard was working with the Bismam, he found a high rate of infant mortality, two out of three children died within the first year of life (Zegwaard 1959, 1039). Naming a child after an ancestor helped to infuse the child with the ndat of the ancestor, giving the child more potential for a healthy full life. In the past, the Bismam believed that trophy skulls would also make their children, “strong and healthy” (1039).

In the days of headhunting, the Bismam believed that trophy skulls would stimulate growth in sago stands (1039). The sago palm played a vital role in the diet of the Bismam and the thinning of sago stands was cause for serious concern. This depletion was interpreted as the malevolent action of a recently deceased spirit or the loss of lifeforce of the area where the trees grow. To correct the situation, a headhunting raid was conducted to placate the spirit or to revive the lifeforce. Father Zegwaard reported seeing
“…decapitated heads hanging…” in fields where bananas, coconuts and sugar cane were growing; yet, he does not mention a configuration (1039). *Bis* poles were known to be taken to the sago stands after use, possibly with skulls still attached (1039).

In the past, the initiation ritual, required an adorned trophy skull to be used to stimulate growth in a young boy insuring his health, maturity and fertility. The belief that trophy skulls made children strong and healthy and stimulate the growth of sago stands was seen as another impetus for the Bismam to headhunt. The metaphor of humans to trees was also part of the Bismam beliefs about the initiation ritual as Father Zegwaard explains,

> As the fruit contains the germinative power, for the Asmat observe time and again how a new sago palm grows form a fallen fruit, and as the human head is associated with fruit, the Asmat expect that the germinative power of the head (fruit) will be transferred to the boy’s genitals by the ritual of placing it between the legs, and thus that it enables him to reproduce. (1039)

The forces that stimulate growth in the sago field and in boys were the lifeforces of *yuvus, ndamup*, and the ancestral force, *ndat*. These elements animated the living person and gave him skills and personality. Like the ancestor skull, the trophy skull was believed to be a repository of an individual’s lifeforces. When the person died, these forces were believed to be transferable. The initiation ritual facilitated this transference from the victim’s skull to the boy being initiated.

**Initiation Ritual**

After a headhunting raid was conducted, the trophy skull became an integral part of the initiation ceremony in which a boy became an adult in Bismam society (Zegwaard 1959, 1022). This ritual required not only a decorated trophy skull but also the name of the victim (1027). The transference of the victim’s lifeforce to the initiate occurred during the ritual through direct contact with the trophy skull (1039).
The warrior who acquired the skull gave it to a young male relative-- son, nephew or cousin-- who was ready for initiation (1026). On rare occasions a skull was given to an older man or woman (1026). The boy’s oldest maternal uncle was responsible for the process of preparing the skull and for preparing the initiate (1022). Upon returning from a successful headhunting raid, the corpse was processed as described in the preceding section. The boy’s uncle went to the river with the head of the corpse and dunked it into the river, while the villagers sang and played the bamboo horn (1022). The uncle took the head into the men’s house and placed it near a fire to dry (1022).

The next part of the ceremony required that the initiate take a “magical mat” to the canoe in which the victim’s body had been transported and to pretend to journey back to the victim’s village (1022). To end the act, water was splashed on his head and he went to the men’s house (1022). Inside the yeu, the initiate sat in a ritual pose with his head down. He ignored all the activities around him and stayed in the position for several days while the head was being processed (1022). At this point, if someone addressed the initiate, they used his *nao jus* or decapitation name that had been coerced from the victim before he was beheaded. Father Zegwaard remarked that “Now and then the bystanders tried to upset him, but he sat tight. In this way he was to make clear that he was going to be a determined, fearless warrior” (1022).

In the afternoon or evening after the raid, the uncle took the head from its position next to the fire and placed it in the fire to burn the hair, creating an ash, which he combined with the blood of the victim that had been gathered in a clam shell at the time of the death (1023). This substance was rubbed on the initiate’s head, shoulders and body (1023). Next, the initiate was dressed in ceremonial attire. A special piece of skin from
the victim’s head was stretched over the bamboo plate and this was given to the initiate. In this part of the initiation ceremony, the initiate was given the victim’s name. At the same time, he was rubbed with the mixture of burnt hair and blood and was adorned in the manner of a headhunter. All of these elements helped to transfer the victim’s lifeforce to the young boy (1023). Father Zegwaard described this ceremony in detail:

… the whole body of Desoipitsj junior was painted with red ochre. Alternating black and white stripes were painted on the face with wet ash and chalk. The hair of the initiate was lengthened with sago-leaf fibers, made in curls; a piece of mother-of-pearl had to hang on his forehead; on the back of the head were placed two big tassels of cassowary feathers; in the septum was placed a beautiful open-work swine-bone or wooden nqpine, decorated with beads or Job’s tears; around the arms, wrists, calves of the legs, and the ankles, belts of finely split rattan were attached, and in one arm-belt was placed a carved human bone or a cassowary bone [dagger]; across the chest and the shoulders was put a crossed band; on the abdomen a triton shell; around the hips a sago leaf-fiber apron [otherwise exclusively worn by married women]; and on the back the bamboo plate or owam. (1023)

At this point, the skull was further cleaned, and the brains were consumed in an evening ritual (1024). The skull was then decorated and placed between the initiate’s legs. The decoration was described by Father Zegwaard,

Thereupon the skull was painted with ash, ochre and chalk, and then decorated with tassels of cassowary feathers, beads, and so forth. The nose was filled with resin, and a net was drawn over the whole head to facilitate attaching the ornaments. (1024)

The young boy continued in the “pose of one who is ashamed” for two or three days, while the skull remained between his legs (1024). The initiate stared intensely at the skull during these few days (1024).

The next stage of the initiation required that boy’s family to fully adorn themselves, the initiate, and the skull. Then, the party went on a journey toward the sea in a canoe that was also freshly decorated (1024). The boy stood in the canoe with the skull and his relatives around him (1024). The other villagers sang with drum accompaniment as they
rowed toward the horizon (1024). In the canoe, the initiate pretended to be an old man slowly losing his strength and life force (1025). Eventually, he pretended to collapse as though dead (1025). Then, his maternal uncle scooped him and the decorated skull up and dipped them into the water (1025). Back in the canoe, all of the initiate’s adornment was removed and the party turned to go home (1025). His ornaments were placed in the “magic mat” and the trophy skull was given to a female (1025). She had received permission to wear the skull during the ritual from the headhunter who killed the victim (1025). The singing continued on the journey back to the village (1025). As the journey continued the initiate pretended to slowly change from a newborn to a young child, eventually to an adult. During this journey, he was addressed several times by his *nao jus* or decapitation name and he replied by blowing on a bamboo horn (1025). Once back at the village he was dressed in ceremonial attire again and his bamboo plates were hung across his chest indicating that he was a full grown adult (1025).

The next stage of the ceremony occurred only a “few days” later (1025). In this stage, the initiate, the woman to whom he had given the trophy skull, his family and the villagers went to the forest to gather sago (1025). The uncles of the initiate cut down a sago palm (1025). As the villagers sang, the initiate and the woman took turns swinging the sago pounder pretending to chop through a sago leaf ring constructed by the uncles (1025). In Father Zegwaard’s description, it was unclear whether the woman was wearing or carrying the trophy skull. Next, everyone in the party went to gather sago and the woman and the initiate exchanged sago with each other (1025). At end of this stage of the cycle, the initiate was, again, dressed in ceremonial attire (1026).
The initiation ceremony continued with a night of dancing to drums in the men’s house (1026). In the morning, everyone plaited their hair with sago strips (1026). The initiate was again dressed in ceremonial attire, and the trophy skull was also decorated (1026). The trophy skull was then hung in the middle of the yeu and stayed there until the next evening, when the final stage of the initiation ceremony took place (1026).

Father Zegwaard described the last part of this ceremony. He states:

At night a fire was built in front of the house, and singers and dancers sat in groups in solemn silence. The initiate came out of the bachelors’ house, carrying the magic mat under his arms and in his hand the richly decorated skull. The men carried shields which they moved up and down, toward them and away from them, while a song was intoned; the dance began and the initiate joined the men, swinging the skull. The songs which were sung during the preparation of the head and during the sago pounding were repeated. (1026)

This dance lasted until dawn and marked the end of the initiation ceremony (1026).

**Adornment of the Initiate**

Several instances of adornment and display were involved in the initiation ritual. The initiate himself was adorned and displayed, and the trophy skull was decorated and displayed. The initiate was decorated when given his headhunting name, for the journey in the canoe, upon return from that journey, after the ceremony in the sago field, and for the final dance in the courtyard of the yeu. His repeated adornment and presentation to the group may have been a way of emphasizing his role as an adult, both to the initiate himself as well as to the group assembled to witness his transformation.

Normally, children do not wear any ornaments, while adults wear a variety of ornaments some of which allude to their status within the community. From Father Zegwaard’s description of the initiate, one can see that the decoration proclaims the newly established adult role of the initiate. For headhunting and ritual occasions, men and women paint themselves with red, white and black pigments and wear sago fibers woven
into their hair (Figure 10, Figure 21, and Figure 38). Arm bands and leg bands are typically worn by men and could be worn as everyday wear or for ceremonial events (Figure 36). Interestingly, the initiate is also adorned with a sago fiber skirt, normally associated with adult women (Figure 35 and Figure 36).

Furthermore, statements about the initiate’s future role as a powerful male or in the past a headhunter seems to be indicated by a number of the ornaments as well. For example, he is decorated with a piece of shell hung on his forehead, (Figure 40) cassowary feathers, (Figure 41) a pig bone or wooden nose ornament in his septum, (Figure 44) and a dagger in his armband (Figure 43). All of these ornaments are associated with powerful men and in the past headhunters. However, the initiate is not adorned with the cuscus headdress, *bipane* nose ornament and white feathers associated with bigmen or in the past, headhunters (Figure 45). These ornaments may indicate a higher level of status than the initiate is deemed worthy of. However, the initiate is adorned with a triton shell, an ornament reserved for men who achieved the status of bigman. Yet, the final ornament received by the initiate is the bamboo plate covered with the victim’s skin, another ornament related to men’s power, but, as shown in Figure 42, women are sometimes allowed to wear it. The mix of ornaments typically worn by both male and female adults suggests the adult role of the initiate, while, the mix of different status level ornaments of a powerful man and the bigman may signify the many levels of status that the initiate will potentially achieve.

**Adornment of the Trophy Skull**

As described earlier a precise method, as dictated by mythology, was followed to prepare the victim’s head to become a trophy skull. Because skulls were used in the
initiation ritual, its preparation fell to the initiate’s mother’s oldest brother (1023). Once completely processed the head was decorated for the first part of the initiation ritual.

The color scheme of the skull was indicated by the materials. Ash was from burnt wood and produced black pigment. Ochre was found in imported clay with heavy deposits of iron ore minerals and produced red paint. Chalk was created from the burning and pulverizing of shells and created the white color. This was the same color combination and materials used as body paint for headhunting and ceremonial dress described earlier (Figure 10 and Figure 21).

Zegwaard’s description refers to attachment of “tassels of cassowary feathers” to the skull. The cassowary, a large flightless bird with large black feathers symbolizes speed, power, and bravery, characteristics associated with the bird (Zegwaard 1959, 1033). One may assume that the actual strength and speed of the cassowary combined with the fact that it is difficult to hunt, were admired qualities. Wearing cassowary feathers instilled these qualities in the person who wore them.

At the end of Zegwaard’s first sentence in his description of the trophy skull, he used the phrase “beads and so forth.” On the ancestor skull, shells and beads were attached on the headdress and on earrings. Much can be inferred from the word “beads” and considering that next he states that “the nose was filled with resin”, it was likely the eye sockets were also filled with resin, and following the pattern of the ancestor skull, these orifices would have coix and abrus seeds (Figure 34). It is likely that the word “bead” was used by Zegwaard to refer to such seeds.

The “net drawn over the whole head to facilitate the attachment of ornaments” mentioned by Zegwaard could refer to a headdress similar to the type found on ancestor
skulls (Figure 2). One can see the fiber netting knitted to frame what would have been the face. Seeds were then beaded into the netting in a crisscross pattern. Strings of beads with feathers at the end were twined to the crisscross seed work. The fiber netting with seeds and feathers could easily be described as “net drawn over the head to facilitate the attachment of ornaments.” Similar netting is found on the adornment of a bone dagger (Figure 69). Here fiber netting covers the entire joint of the bone. Strings of seeds with cassowary feathers are knitted into the netting. This form also conforms to Father Zegwaard’s description. However, the main difference in these two forms is the display of the facial area of the skull. Father Zegwaard does state that the net was drawn over the whole head; however, if this was done then the nose cavity filled with resin and the colors used to paint the skull would be covered by the knitted fibers. For example, in Figure 69, one cannot see the various knobs of the joint of the bone because of this netting. Because the name of the victim was collected when the skull was collected, it seems likely for this ritual the individuality of the deceased was an important consideration. Individualism would be better expressed if the trophy skull was decorated in a manner similar to the ancestor skull with netting like a headdress with cassowary feathers and orifices filled with red and white seeds.

**Display of the Trophy Skull in the Initiation Ritual**

The decorated trophy skull played a substantial role in the many stages of initiation ceremony and would have been seen by the villagers participating in the ritual. The first appearance of the adorned trophy skull was in the men’s house where it was placed between the initiate’s legs to be meditated on. From this location, the men of the yeu would have easily seen this display. And villagers passing by the yeu may have glimpsed this display because the doors of the yeu stayed open most of the time. Next, the adorned
trophy skull was carried by the initiate in the canoe and immersed into the water with him. This dramatic display would only have been seen by those participating in the ritual. The skull was then given to a favored female. This woman brought the trophy skull into the sago grounds for the ritual preparation and exchange of sago. It is unclear whether the skull would have been decorated during this part of the ritual. After this stage, the trophy skull was adorned again and prominently displayed in the center of the men’s house for twenty-four hours. Members of the yeu as well as some passing villagers would have seen this display. Finally, the decorated trophy skull was carried by the initiate as he participated in the concluding dance of the initiation ceremony. This display would have been seen by the men and women participating in the ritual. The similarity in the decoration of the initiate and the trophy skull must have visually suggested a connection between the two and the repeated display of the initiate with the skull must have reinforced this connection for the viewers witnessing the ritual.

**Prestige**

Positions of power are not dictated by heredity. The Bismam live in an egalitarian society where any male has the opportunity to rise to a position of importance (Eyde 1967, 236). In anthropological terms, a bigman exists in small communities and rises to that position because of his skills, personality and charisma (Bodley 1994, 436). His power is temporal and based on the cooperation of those around him (436). In the Bismam system, a man can distinguish himself by excelling in hunting, woodcarving or chanting (Eyde 1967, 76).

In the past, however, even to be considered for the position of bigman, a man had to have taken at least a “few heads” (Zegwaard 1959, 1040). A man had to work hard to achieve status (Eyde 1967, 234). He had to become so good at hunting that others would
want to befriend him and ingratiate themselves to him (234). A man who sought this power worked to create alliances with other men in the community-- through his marriage, his offspring’s marriages and through *papisj* relationships (234). By successfully marrying, he gained both a woman to process sago and a portion of her family’s sago grounds so that he had more territory to gather sago from (235). A man married more than one woman doubled his output of sago and his territory increased by the incorporation of the new wife’s inheritance from her family (235). *Tesumajipic* also had extended family households. His brothers may choose to live with him. By having more than one wife, the bigman aligned himself to more than one brother-in-law who might choose to live with him (234). Eventually, sons would add to his entourage, and daughters would bring in sons-in-law (234). The combined efforts of this expanded group produced more food, and the combined territory provided more resources. A man who sought to become a *tesumajipic* produced more sago so that he had food to share, which made others beholden to him (234). By aligning themselves to him, the extended family members assured themselves through the act of reciprocal food sharing that a steady source of food was available (237).

The group also fought together in local disputes as well in headhunting raids (237). As this group grew larger, the likelihood of sago grounds becoming depleted and fishing streams being over fished was increased (237). In this case, a large group moved into the territory of another village (237). At first, they temporarily trespassed. The women processed sago while the men stood guard or fought the owners of the land (237). Depending on the ferocity of resistance of the original owners, the group attempted to claim the land permanently. If the land grab was successful, the *tesumajipic* gained the
rights to the land, which he then apportioned to the members of his extended family (237).

The extra food gained through the expansion of territory, allowed the bigman to sponsor ceremonial events. Large amounts of food, including sago, fish, fruits, wild animals and the sago larvae delicacy, were brought to the yeu by members of the tesumajipic’s group and then redistributed among members of the whole yeu and guests from other yeus. Food exchanges were a way to establish friendly relationships with neighboring villages. David Eyde described an exchange that he witnessed between a group from Amanamkai and the village of Mipim 1961. Warim was the bigman from Amanamkai and Wararu was the bigman from Mipim.

About a month later, in the course of a ritual trading expedition upstream, several canoe-loads of men from Aman-Namkaj [Amanamkai] went to Mipim. As the canoes approached Mipim, Warim stood astride the canoe on the gunwales with his feathered paddle, po mot, held high. The men shouted loudly and pounded their paddles on the sides of the canoe while the leading chanter of the group called out over and over again that this was to be a peaceful visit to Mipim, and Warim called out that everyone was to be generous in their dealings with the people of Mipim. For a long time there was no answer from the shore, but finally some Mipim men appeared and Warim and Jokpenem paddled forward. When peaceful relations had been established, the rest of the canoes of Aman-Namkaj proceeded to shore.

On shore, most of the men from Aman-Namkaj disembarked. Tobacco, which had been saved out of that which I had distributed in the course of ceremonial cycles, was traded by the men of Aman-Namkaj for sago and bananas from the people of Mipim. This was not a part of the orok exchange. Warim, on the other hand, carried sago leaf sacks of jec, a kind of shellfish, to the men’s house and to Wakaru’s house. In all, nine sacks of shell fish about one food high by one half foot by one half foot, and three mat bags of shrimp of about the same size were laid on the floor of the men’s house. One or two bags of shell fish were carried directly to Wakaru’s house. In return, the people of Mipim piled reciprocal gifts on the ground outside the men’s house. There were three large bundles of kum, a fruit which resembles a green apple, and about sixty-five four pound lumps of sago laid down in two piles next to each other. I presume that the two piles corresponded to two moieties of Mipim men’s house group. Of the food laid down, Warim carted off about a fourth to his canoe. The rest was picked up by other Aman-Namkaj people, who all chipped in to make a pile of tobacco for the people of Mipim. Finally, all the
canoes were loaded. The man of Namkaj paddled away, pausing several times to call back salutation to the people of Mipim. (284-285)

In this description, note the privileges of the bigman. He straddled the edges of the canoe’s hull and carried a feathered paddle. As mentioned in the third chapter, carrying a feathered paddle was a privilege of a tesumajipic. He also received a fourth of the food given to his group. Likewise the bigman from Mipim received a greater portion of the food. Tesumajipic received special treatment in the form of more food and less manual labor, and they had the right to adorn themselves with symbolic objects such as an ancestor skull worn on the chest (Figure 37, Figure 43 and Figure 67) (Zegwaard 1959, 1040). The bigman’s privileges continued in many other ways as Eyde describes:

Only a tesumajipic is privileged to wear a triton shell, pikawor, at the waist. Only he uses a paddle decorated with white cockatoo feathers, pompot, or cassowary feathers, po jiwi. His most vivid stance is standing up on the edges of the sides of the canoe, paddling or blowing on a headhunting horn. Such men are called upon to recite the names of the men they have killed, newen atakam, to overawe the spirits in the course of a ceremonial cycle. They have the unquestioned right to sit with the drummers and the chanters at the central fireplace in the men’s house in the course of a ritual or distribution. They receive the lion’s share of any food distributed, especially when they come to another men’s house as guests. (Eyde 1967, 236-237)

Wearing the triton shell, like wearing the ancestor skull on the chest, was a privilege of the bigman and the feathered paddle was a mark of the high social standing of the tesumajipic. Only headhunters, who had a large number of victim’s names and were bigmen, recited in the newen atakam. This was a list of all their victims and where the victim had been killed (Zegwaard 1959, 1030). By sitting in the center of the men’s house, a tesumajipic has the front row seat to all the events staged there. By receiving the most food, he continued the cycle of reciprocal giving with his extended family, solidifying his power base. Tesumajipic, or bigmen, were headhunters who had reached the highest level of status in the Bismam society.
**Kus Fe Assemblage**

Another function of the trophy skull was as a prestige object. The headhunter went on a raid to fulfill ritual obligations and to acquire territory. Even when working for the benefit of the ancestors or to help a young boy become a man, a warrior was also motivated by individual rewards. Headhunting was a prerequisite to gaining a wife and to building one’s reputation to become *tesumajipic*.

After the skull was used in the *bis* ritual or the initiation ritual, its decoration was no longer needed. The unadorned skull became part of a *kus fe*, an assemblage made of an accumulation of trophy skulls attached to a rope and strung together to form a column (Figure 3 and Figure 76) (Zegwaard 1959, 1039). The visual elements of this configuration were simple-- rope and skulls; however the symbolism of the form expressed concepts integral to the Bismam ideologies. Like the *bis* pole display, the symbolism of fruit played a role in this configuration. When the string of skulls was hung, it suggested naturally occurring arrangements of fruit in pods, clusters, or bunches. Looking at a *kus fe* arrangement, even someone from outside Bismam culture made the connection between skulls and fruit as Sowada related:

Colonel Thompson was commissioned to investigate the area for signs of Japanese intrusion. He related that, upon going down the Wildeman river upon a huge raft decked with four machine guns, “human heads festooned almost every hut we passed and hung in clusters like bunches of grapes.” (Sowada 1961, 25)

The arrangement of skulls in this manner reinforced the metaphor that heads were human fruit. In the swamp habitat of the Bismam, many types of fruit-bearing plants may have been the inspiration for this type of arrangement such as coconut palms, banana trees, jack fruit plants, and papyra plants (Figure 17, Figure 18, Figure 19, Figure 22).
The relation of the clusters of hanging skulls to clusters of fruit was also reflective of the belief that the lifeforces of the trophy skull have at ability to animate life. Father Zegwaard clearly explained this relationship.

As the fruit contains the germinative power, for the Asmat observe time and again how a new sago palm grows from a fallen fruit, and as the human head is associated with fruit, the Asmat expect the germinative power of the head (fruit) will be transferred to the boy’s genitals by the ritual of placing it between his legs, and thus that it enables him to reproduce. (Zegwaard 1959, 1039)

Trophy skulls, as stated in the previous section, were used in the initiation ritual which was also based on the head having the power to stimulate growth. After a skull had been used in the initiation ritual, it was returned to the warrior who made the kill. Its adornment was no longer necessary. The form of the assemblage suggested a fruit form, and one can conclude that the trophy skull was still considered to represent the germinative power, but not identification of the individual. However, a large number of skulls indicated a large number of youths who had been transformed into men. Men who would in turn be related to the warrior who owned the kus fe and thus, were called upon to defend the warrior if necessary. This group of men would also be ready to defend the yeu and the village.

The impact of this visual display lay in the numbers of trophy skulls used in the construction. A headhunter’s status within the community was measured by the number of trophy skulls hanging in his kus fe. Only a tesumajipic had the privilege to recite a newen atakam, and this listing of all one has killed was designed to inform the spirit world, especially those spirits with malicious intentions, of the aptitude of the headhunter (Eyde 1967, 236-237). Reciting the list gave a bigman and his followers a sense of safety (1034). The same can be suggested for the kus fe which can be seen as a visual recitation
of kills thus serving as a forceful visual statement of the *tesumajipic* who made the kills. The *kus fe* could also be read as a warning to others, living or dead, to beware.

While the visual elements of the *kus fe* other than skulls were sparse, the impact of the assemblage lay in the quantity of skulls. Since the prestige and position of a male lay in his ability to acquire the trophy skulls, the *kus fe* was an important means by which the headhunter could claim attention among his peers.

Furthermore, a woman’s status was tied to that of her closest male relative: uncle, father, brother or husband. Because of the importance of headhunting as a measure of status, it behooved her social position to encourage her closest male relative to headhunt. In the case of her husband, she could exert the most influence through denial of sexual favors (Smidt 1993, 20). But, she could also insult him in public if he had not proven himself in warfare (20). Logically her status was also measured by the *kus fe* of her male relative displayed.

**Kus Fe Display**

This assemblage was hung in a doorway of the men’s house (Figure 32). The *yeu’s* doorways were open to a public courtyard, the major path for crossing the village and the river beyond (Figure 31). Common pedestrian traffic would have been able to see the *kus fe* display in the doorway. Each doorway was associated with a particular family. People of the village who were in the courtyard or were passing the men’s house as they moved through the village would know exactly whose family was associated with the door and would know the bigman of that family. Because the villagers would have had the details of the ownership of the doorway and the *tesumajipic* associated with the family, they would have understood that the *kus fe* was a statement of that particular individual’s power.
Colonel Thompson reported that he was able to see these displays as he navigated the river. The display of the *kus fe* for Bismam people on the river, who may or may not know the bigman, understood the display of the *kus fe* demonstrated the power of the *yeu*.

Doorways in the men’s house were open; thatching was placed over the door at night (Eyde 1967, 95). *Kus fe* were also displayed near the fireplaces within the *yeu* (Figure 33). In this case, it was still possible that a passerby could catch a glimpse of the *kus fe*. However, it would seem that a display over the fireplace becomes more of a statement to the people within the men’s house. The ancestors were believed to be physically manifested in the woodcarvings and masks inside the men’s house so this more intimate display could be for their benefit.

The *kus fe* hung in the doorway to a family home would also have been seen by the foot traffic along the common path of the village but perhaps not visible from the courtyard or the river (Figure 77). As in the men’s house, a *kus fe* might be hung next to the fireplace of a family home (Figure 3). The home of a bigman housed extended families that include wives, perhaps brothers and brothers-in-law, children and their spouses. If the display was seen from outside of the home, the *kus fe* would have demonstrated the power of the bigman who owned the home. If the display was only seen by the extended family members, then the *kus fe* would also have demonstrated the power of the bigman to them and may have been seen as a sense of security because the viewer had taken steps to align themselves with a powerful headhunter. Furthermore, the *tesumajipic* would have displayed the *kus fe* in his home for the benefit of any ancestral spirits inhabiting the family home who would also have been appreciative of the commitment of revenge demonstrated by the assemblage of many trophy skulls.
The *kus fe* was a purposefully arranged group of objects meant to convey meanings to the members of the living community and spirit community. The Bismam headhunter arranged the skulls to imply fruit, fertility, and fulfillment of obligations, bravery of the headhunter and prestige of the *tesumajipic*.

**Conclusion**

Appeasing the ancestors required their living kin to remember them and revenge their death. The desire to seek revenge was based on the Bismam ideology of dealing with others in terms of reciprocity, which in turn led to the balance of the natural and supernatural worlds. The display of trophy skulls on the *bis* pole was a visual statement to the living community of the power of the headhunter to achieve revenge and the success of the men’s house to have conducted the raid. It was also a visual statement for the ancestral community that they were not forgotten.

The form of the *bis* pole with hanging trophy skulls reminded the viewer of the creation myth of Fumeripitsj where men were created from trees. The Bismam spoke of themselves and their bodies in terms of a tree; thus, the head was the fruit of the body. The form of placing the skulls on the projection of the *bis* pole suggested fruit on a tree.

The trophy skull was decorated for the initiation ceremony. It was decorated in a manner similar to the ancestor skull compete with headdress, abrus seeds and coix seeds. To emphasize further connection to the victim, it was also painted in a manner similar to that of painting the face of the living Bismam. Because the name of the victim was collected along with the head, it can be suggested that the identity and individuality of the victim were valued in this context. The trophy skull served to transfer the adult power of the victim to the initiate. In this way, the young boy became an adult. The repeated display of the decorated trophy skull throughout the initiation ritual, between the legs of
the initiate, in the canoe with the initiate, in the middle of the men’s house, and swung by
the initiate in the final dance of the ceremony, ensured that everyone involved in the
ceremony understood the connection between the initiate and the victim. This ritual
ensured the health of the initiate and his growth and maturity. In turn, the future well-
being of the community was ensured by the continued existence of potent males. Trophy
skulls also insured the growth of sago stands and thus the community’s continued well
being.

Only a man who had taken many heads became a leader in the Bismam community.
Headhunters were rewarded with loyalty, respect and followers. A warrior with many
skulls proved his superior strength against other humans and his ability to control his own
destiny in a harsh environment. A group of trophy skulls was a testament to the strength
of the headhunter. When placed in the context of a *kus fe* arrangement the trophy skull
did not need to be decorated. In this arrangement, the trophy skull was disconnected from
its identity and personal characteristics. Here, the skull was identified more with the
concept of fruit as demonstrated by the arrangement of the skull to resemble a hanging
cluster of fruit. The deliberate placement of the *kus fe* near the doorway of the *yeu* or the
family home announced to anyone passing by on the river or village path, that the bigman
associated with that doorway was powerful and productive. The placement of the *kus fe*
near the fireplace in the *yeu* or in the family home was also seen from outside but not as
boldly. However, the interior placement was a statement to *yeu* members and family
members that they were aligned with a powerful male providing them with a sense of
security.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

For the Bismam, a decorated or displayed human skull was more than a memento of an individual. The manipulation of the skull into meaningful constructions as part of several visual configurations served to connect the Bismam viewer to the powers of those from whom the skulls were taken and reiterated ideas of power and potency central to their philosophy.

The treatment of the skull as a physical object varied with the role that the deceased played inside or outside of the community. If the deceased was a member of the community, the skull was retained, after the corpse had disintegrated, and the skull had naturally separated from the skeleton. If the deceased was from outside the community, the head was forcibly removed from the body. If the skull was that of the member of the community, the mandible was secured to the rest of the skull with plaited fiber and resin, keeping the underlying facial structure intact. If the skull was taken as a headhunting trophy, the mandible was removed and used as a pendant for a necklace. When comparing the treatment of the mandible between ancestor and the enemy, it is evident that the Bismam considered the application of the mandible necessary to recreate the portrait of the individual. The eye and nose cavities of the ancestor skull were filled with resin into which white and red seeds where set. These colors alluded to pigments actually worn by the living and were found on many types of adornment such as necklaces, headdresses and carrying bags. Trophy skulls also had these orifices filled with resin, red abrus seeds, and white coix seeds, and during rituals taking place immediately after the
headhunting raid, the surfaces of trophy skulls were decorated with pigments of red, white and black, simulating facial paint. Resin was also used to attach a nose ornament such as a *bipane* shell or boar bone to the nose cavity of the ancestor skull; however, the trophy skull was not adorned with nose ornaments. Because of the individuality associated with items of personal adornment, a specific nose ornament identified the individual represented by his skull, thus constructing a portrait. Ancestor skulls were also given a headdress made of a fiber framework decorated with seeds, shells, and, typically, white feathers. Trophy skulls were similarly outfitted with a headdress made of a fiber framework, but the trophy skull had the black feathers of a cassowary bird attached to the fiber headdress.

The skull of the deceased family member was manipulated to recreate a portrait of the family member when he was a living, vital member of the community, expressing the individuality of the deceased and connecting the skull with its living self. Like the ancestor skull, the trophy skull was decorated when it was necessary to connect with the living individual whose name, power and strength were respected, but when that connection was no longer necessary, the decoration was no longer necessary. Then, the skull became part of an assemblage that disconnects the victim’s skull from his individuality.

The decoration of the ancestor skull also served to remind the viewer of the powerful and respected headhunter. Men aspired to be headhunters while women sought to be associated with headhunters, either by kinship or marriage. Therefore, a living individual wore the items that signified a connection to the headhunter, such as cockatoo feathers, hornbill feathers, *bipane* and boar bone nose ornaments, and abrus and coix
seeds. When that person died, their portrait was recreated with these same materials. The deceased individual’s portrait, as recreated on the ancestor skull, reiterated the role of the headhunter, the most prestigious member of the community.

The trophy skull had associations with the standard headhunter visual form as well. Black was a color symbolic of headhunters, and the cassowary feathers in the headdress were black. Red and white colors of the abrus seeds and coix seed beads repeated the color palette of body paint. The trophy skull was also painted with these colors. When the trophy skull was used in the initiation ritual, the individuality and potency of the victim were valued since they reinforced the power of the initiate for whom it was used. The decoration of the skull with powerful ornaments such as cassowary feathers served to connect the trophy skull to the power of the headhunter and in the transference of that power to the initiate.

Not only were ancestor and trophy skulls decorated to create visual statements, they were purposefully arranged and displayed in various degrees of visibility in the public arena. One powerful method of display was to wear the skull. Ancestor skulls were most often displayed to the public in this manner. A male who had proven himself in headhunting raids and who was also a *tesumajipic* was allowed to wear the skull suspended across his chest as a pendant, while a male with less prestige had to wear the skull so that it rested on his back. This method of display emphasized the connection between the living relative and the dead relative.

Trophy skulls were not necessarily worn. However, during the initiation ritual, a male initiate had to hold a decorated trophy skull in front of his genitals. This format of display was not as public as the wearing of an ancestor skull, yet, all the male members
of the yeu would have seen this exhibition. Like wearing or sleeping on the ancestor skull, this method of holding the trophy skull suggests a physical connection with the skull as object and a spiritual connection with the lifeforces contained within the skull.

Skulls were also displayed in the Bismam home. At first, this may seem like a private display; however, because individual Bismam homes had open doorways that were only covered at night, much inside the house could be seen by the passing villager, and it was often intended to be seen. Ancestor skulls were hung on the walls of private homes and the *kus fe* arrangements of trophy skulls were placed near the fireplace or close to a doorway. Ancestor skulls were hung as individual units while the *kus fe* was a large cluster of skulls. The visual power of the ancestor was emphasized by the portrait of an individual headhunting ancestor. However, the *kus fe* was a display of many skulls and the visual statement was intensified by the number of skulls included in the assemblage. Its placement in the family home testified to the power of the bigman who collected the skulls and the family that supported him. *Kus fe* were also displayed inside the yeu. When placed near the *tesumajipic’s* fireplace, all the males of the yeu saw this powerful statement of headhunting prowess and respected the owner. Furthermore, all the *ndat* ancestral spirits that inhabited the *bis* poles, masks and shields saw this display. When strategically placed close to the doorway, all of the village and anyone passing by on the river were confronted with this arrangement reminding them of the power of the headhunter, his yeu, and his village.

One final display to be noted was the placement of trophy heads on *bis* poles. The *bis* ritual was a pledge to the headhunting victims that their deaths would be avenged. For the *bis* ritual, the headhunters of the village went on a raid. If they were successful, they
hung the enemy’s head from the projection of the *bis* pole. This was a visual statement to
the community testifying to the strength of the warriors. It was a statement to the
ancestors that they were remembered and respected. This arrangement was a visual
manifestation of the placation of the ancestors and the restoration of balance to the world
of the living and the dead.

As headhunters, the Bismam beliefs about death and the spirit world perpetuated
the need for ritual murder, while their understanding of the skull’s power and potency led
to their collection of the human head. The ancestor skull was decorated and displayed to
connect the viewer symbolically with the deceased individual who was portrayed through
ornamentation as a powerful headhunter and beneficial ancestor. The trophy skull was
decorated and displayed to connect the viewer with the individuality of an enemy who
was depicted as a headhunter. The trophy skull was also displayed in a form that
suggested fruit, thus disconnecting the viewer from the individuality of the victim and
connecting the viewer instead with the myth of creation. The human skull, when
decorated or displayed in an assemblage, became a powerful visual statement connecting
the viewer to individuality, headhunting prowess, ancestor potency, *tesumajipic* prestige,
creation mythology, and a metaphorical understanding of self.
Figure 1. Map of Asmat region with art style regions and inset of New Guinea. (Smidt 1993, 16-17)
Figure 2. Ancestor Skull. Collected by Gunter and Ursula Konrad in 1971 from Baous village. Human skull, feathers, rattan, seeds, fur, and shell. Völkerkundemuseum der Josefine und Eduard von Portheim-Stiftung für Wissenschaft und Kunst, Heidelberg. (Konrad 1996, 75)
Figure 3. *Kus fe* inside family home. Atsj village. 1959. (Konrad 1996, 74)
Figure 5. Bís pole with trophy skulls. Collected by Paul Wirz in 1922 from Siretsj River area. Museum der Kulturen, Basel. (Kaepller, Kaufmann and Newton 1997, 495)
Figure 6. Central style shield. Carved by Tjokotsj. Collected by Adrian Gerbrands in 1961 from Atjametsj village. Wood, lime, red ochre, charcoal, sago leaf fiber, and seeds. Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden. (Smidt 1993, 125)
Figure 7. Northwest style shield. Collected by the Maatschappij ter Bevordering van het Natuurkundig Onderzoek der Nederlandsche Kolonien in 1913 from the Unier River. Wood, lime, red ocher, charcoal. Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden. (Smidt 1993, 54)
Figure 8. Citak style shield. Collected by J.J. Spijker in 1954 from Urebi village. Wood, lime, red ochre, and charcoal. Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden. (Smidt 1993, 55)
Figure 10. Men in canoes with body paint, plain paddles and feather paddles.  
(Schneebaum 1990, 16)
Figure 11. Drum. Collected by W.M. Visser from Casuarina Coast. Wood and lizard skin. Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden. (Smidt 1993, 108)
Figure 13. *Jipae* masquerade. Amanamkai village. 1961. (Smidt 1993, 39)
Figure 14. Five major dialect groups of the Asmat language. (Eyde 1967, 2)
Figure 15. The Siretsj River. (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 268)
Figure 16. Chopping the buttress of a mangrove tree. Basim village. 1979. (Smidt 1993, 65)

Figure 17. Coconut palm. (McCurrach 1976, 53)
Figure 18. Banana tree. (Smith et al. 1992, 271)

Figure 19. Jack fruit. (Muller 1988, 126)
Figure 20. Sago palm. (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 92)
Figure 21. Capricorn larvae at *bis* ceremony. Amborep village. (O’Neill 1996, 30-31)

Figure 22. Papyra fruit. (Smith et al. 1992, 162)
Figure 23. Cuscus. (Flannery 1990, 131)
Figure 24. Tree kangaroo. (Flannery 1990, 97)
Figure 25. Cassowary. (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 118)

Figure 26. Illustration of white cockatoo. (Beehler 1986, 20)
Figure 27. Illustration of black palm cockatoo. (Beehler 1986, 20)

Figure 28. Female hornbill. (Coates 1977, 111)
Figure 29. Flying Fox. (Flannery 1990, 266)

Figure 30. Hunters with wild boar. (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 132)
Figure 31. Map of Amanamkai village. 1961-62. (Eyde 1967, 102)
Figure 32. Exterior Awok *yeu* along river. Amanamkai village. 1961. (Rockefeller 1967, 50)
Figure 33. Interior of Awok yeu. Amanamkai village. 1961. (Rockefeller 1967, 89)
Figure 34. Ancestor skull. Collected by W.M. Visser in 1956 from Pirimapun village. Human skull, feathers, rattan, seeds, sago palm leaf. Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden. (Smidt 1996, 50)
Figure 35. Jewejmenmaq wearing a traditional awer. Amanamkai village. 1961. (Smidt 1993, 31)
Figure 36. Woman with *awer*, armbands, breast covering and man with cuscus headband, white feathers, and armband dagger. (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 295)
Figure 37. Man with ancestor skull, waist belt, and nose ornament. (Berge 1994, 45)
Figure 38. Ndanim with sago strips in hair, armbands and a waist band. Omadesep village. 1961. (Rockefeller 1967, 86)
Figure 40. Man with shell necklace, shell pendant on his forehead, arm bands, waist band, cuscus headband, feathers in his hair, and nose ornament. He is carrying a carved paddle and a bamboo horn. Otsjanep village. 1961. (Rockefeller 1967, 152)
Figure 41. Man with abrus and coix seed necklace, cassowary feathers in hair, facial paint, armbands and carrybag on his back. Ayam village. 1995. (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 288)
Figure 42. Woman with earrings, boar’s tusk necklace, bamboo pendant necklace, and facial paint. (Schneebaum 1990, 58)
Figure 43. Man with ancestor skull on chest, trophy dagger in armband, and necklace with atlas vertebra pendant. (Sowada 1968, 191)
Figure 44. Jaobenem with wild boar bone nose ornament. Amanamkai village. 1960.
(Smidt 1993, 30)
Figure 45. Bishop Sowada and man with *bipane* nose ornament, cuscus headband, white feathers in hair, many necklaces and a carrying bag on his chest. (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 13)
Figure 46. Magasew with bipane nose ornament, cuscus headband and feathers in her hair. Her friend wears a dog’s tooth necklace. Amanamkai village. 1961. (Rockefeller 1967, 66)

Figure 47. Selection of carrying bags. Left to right: Basim village, Amborep village, Otsjanep village. Plaited sago fiber, seeds, feathers and quills. Konrad collection. (Konrad, Konrad and Schneebaum 1981, 160)
Figure 48. Man on left wearing a carrying bag on his chest and woman on the right wearing a carrying bag on her back. (Konrad and Konrad 1996, 294)
Figure 49. Man with plain paddle. 1961. (Rockefeller 1967, 78)
Figure 50. Man with cassowary feather paddle. 1961. (Rockefeller 1967, 78)
Figure 51. Man with ancestor skull on back. (Schneebaum 1990, 57)
Figure 52. Women rolling in the mud. Omandesep village. (Kirk 1972, 348)
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Katherine “Alex” Flanagan graduated from the University of Florida in 1988 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with an emphasis in painting. She continued her studies at the University of Florida in the art history program and served as a teaching assistant for many years. She worked at the Visual Resources Center on campus for a number of years as well. She graduated in 2005 with a Master of Arts in art history with an emphasis in oceanic art. She plans to continue her study of the Bismam people.