



ASMAT SPIRIT MASKS AS AN IDEA FOR CREATION OF PAINTINGS

Yohanis Paulus Kangganam¹, Bayu Aji Suseno², Sarah Sabrina Mukkadam³

¹²³ Fine Arts Study Program, Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia Tanah Papua

E-mail: bayu@isbi-tanahpapua.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of designing this artwork is to be a suggestion for the continuity of maintaining the noble traditions and culture of the Asmat tribe, to be a means of knowledge of cultural science between generations, and to be a means of spiritual respect for ancestral spirits. Data collection methods include observation and documentation. Observations observe the activities of the spirit mask party ceremony or ritual using the interview method with informants of the object of research Spirit Mask and the subject of research, informants. Documentation is done by collecting data from several studies such as books, scientific articles, popular articles, magazines, photographs, and videos. The research on the Asmat spirit mask was carried out by the author based on the following stages: first, efforts to find ideas or concepts; second, data collection; third, data analysis is carried out by designing or making representations of the spirit mask folklore and documentation in the form of videos and photos; fourth, data visualization in the form of paintings; fifth, data presentation in the form of an art exhibition, and scientifically accounted for through written works. The tools and materials needed for making paintings include paint, pencils, paint brushes, sand beads, broomsticks. Canvas and bark as media for painting while for installation works are broomsticks and glue guns. The creation of paintings and installation artworks of spirit masks begins with a pencil sketch followed by paint.



1. INTRODUCTION

Papua is Indonesia's most eastern province, located adjacent to Papua New Guinea. The word Papua comes from the Malay language, meaning curly hair (Warami, 2013). This also corresponds to the physical appearance of the indigenous tribes there. The Asmat tribe is one of 254 indigenous tribes inhabiting eastern Indonesia (Rumansara, 2015). The Asmat tribe is an indigenous Papuan tribe, the majority of who live in South Papua. The Asmat population is divided into two groups: those living along the coast and those living inland. Although both are Asmat, these two populations have significant differences, ranging from dialects, lifestyles, social structures, and ritual traditions. Generally, the Asmat people live around large rivers, such as the Aswets River, the Pomats River, the Undir River, and the Bets River. It can be said that the Asmat people live in an area isolated from the outside world, due to their difficult-to-reach location. They generally work as hunters of wild animals, such as wild boar, and fish in the rivers. Furthermore, they harvest sago palms as their staple food. The Asmat people hold a strong philosophy of life emphasizing the balance between three elements of life: the relationship between ancestral spirits and humans and nature, the relationship between humans and humans, and the relationship between humans and nature (Rumansara et al., 2014). The Asmat are one of the most renowned tribes in Papua for their unique and diverse culture. Besides their distinctive traditional woodcarvings, the Asmat are also renowned for their various traditional rituals (Koupun, 2016). The Asmat have a rich culture that encompasses carved statues, traditional houses, dances, masks, and more. The uniqueness of this tribe lies in their carved sculptures, inspired by the diversity and lifestyle of the Asmat region, South Papua. These carved sculptures are marketable internationally, making them highly sought after internationally. The purpose of designing this artwork is to preserve the noble traditions and culture of the Asmat people, to serve as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge between generations, and to serve as a means of spiritual respect for ancestral spirits. Thus, the cultural artwork of the Asmat tribe has a significant meaning and role in the aspect of accumulating good values in social life. Masks are the main medium or tool used by the Asmat Tribe in Papua in ceremonies held at the JEW or bachelor's house or *pesta bujang*. In Asmat terms, this party is called *Jiwi*. This Spirit Party aims to bless the young Asmat tribe and the spirits of close family members who have passed away. According to historical accounts, this ceremony began with an incident experienced by an orphan, a story that originated from one of the villages in Asmat, specifically the *bismam* group where there is a village called Kampung Mbait. The Asmat tribe uses this mask (*jupui*) to commemorate or connect directly with the spirits of their ancestors through traditional ceremonies.

Previous research that raises the theme of spirit masks includes an article written by Dea Anandya Rahardjo and Oki Hamka Suyatna entitled *Designing a Children's Book of Mask Stories and Asmat Tribe Spirit Feasts Through Paper Art Illustrations* (2014). Previous research studies on the meaning and philosophy of Indonesian masks that can be used as references in this writing are: first, an article written by Martono, Iswahyudi, and Aran Handoko entitled *Nusantara Ethnic Masks in the Development of Global Culture* (2017) which explains the description of the types, names, and characters of Indonesian ethnic masks. Martono, et al (1994) explain the function of masks as embodiments, worship, grave provisions, dance clothing equipment, and have values, functions that are always changing, developing according to developments. Second, an article written by Erika

Ameilia Luktriasri, Siti Halimatuz Zahro, Putri Dwi Febriyanti, and Ilfiana Firzaq Arifin entitled *The Charm of the Kona Mask Dance: Delving into the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the City of Tape* (2024) which explains that the Kona mask dance can be an appropriate strategy for preserving cultural heritage in the modern era. Third, an article written by Finney Lavenery Akanfani, Asharya Febrian Hendie, Adi Kurniawan Daud, Dia Kristina, and Isak Padakari entitled *Betawi Mask Dance: Philosophical Studies and Symbolic Studies* (2022) which explains the Betawi Mask Dance through philosophical studies and symbolic studies and has three types of masks worn during the performance, namely the Panji mask, the Samba mask and the orange mask which are used alternately during the performance. The research related to the creation of fine art works based on Papuan local wisdom are: first, an article written by I Wayan Rai S entitled *Creation of Art Works Based on Papuan Local Wisdom* (2021) which explains how Papuan people translate local wisdom into the creation of artistic and cultural works; second, an article written by I Dewa Ketut Wicaksana entitled *The Meaning and Value of Papuan Fine Art as a Form of Cultural Identity Based on Local Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary Review* (2024) which explains the meaning and variety of values in Papuan fine art as a form of cultural identity based on local wisdom.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research approach that aims to understand social, cultural, and human behavioral phenomena in depth from the participant's perspective, with a focus on non-numerical (descriptive) data such as text, interviews, or observations. The research location is in Mbait Village, Asmat Regency, South Papua. The data collection technique uses the interview method by observing the activities of the spirit mask party ceremony or ritual using the interview method with a source from Mbait Village, Petrus Junumpits (67) as the deputy head of the tradition. Documentation is carried out by collecting data from several studies such as books, scientific articles, popular articles, magazines, photographs, and videos. The research on the Asmat spirit mask was carried out by the author based on the following stages: first, efforts to find ideas or concepts; second, data collection; third, data analysis is carried out by designing or making representations of the spirit mask folklore and documentation in the form of videos and photos; fourth, data visualization in the form of paintings; fifth, data presentation in the form of an art exhibition, and scientifically accounted for through written works.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The tools and materials needed for the paintings include paint, a pencil for sketching, a paintbrush, sand beads, and a broom. Canvas and bark are used as media for painting, while for the installations brooms and a glue gun are used. The creation of the paintings and spirit mask installations begins with a pencil sketch and is then completed with paint. This sketch is a combination of the two images above. First, draw a sketch of a person sitting sewing, then combine the sketches of the spirit mask. Once the two sketches are combined, color them in until they're finished. Image 2 shows a model weaving a spirit mask, used by the artist as a reference. This scene also serves as the concept used by the artist to create a work depicting the beginning of the spirit mask-making process.



Figure 1. Sketch of the Spirit Mask Weaving Scene
Source : Yohanis P. Kangganam (2025)

A. Visual Story: The Birth of the Spirit Mask in Asmat Tribe Tradition

The creation of this painting and installation artwork was inspired by the Spirit Mask, a cultural tradition of the Asmat tribe in South Papua. According to historical accounts, this ceremony originated from an orphaned child, a story that originated in one of the Asmat villages, specifically the *Bismam* tribe. The Bismam tribe itself is one of twelve tribes in Asmat Regency. Spirit masks are commonly used in the *Jiwi* ceremony, which aims to establish a connection between humans and the spirits of deceased ancestors.

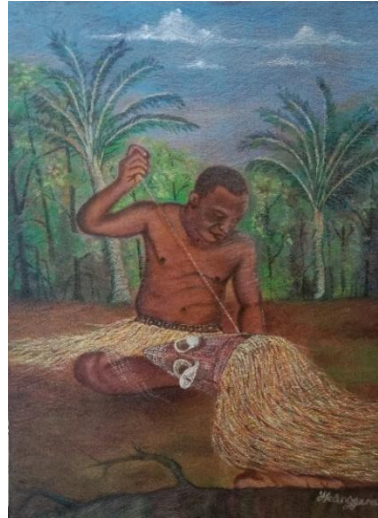


Figure 2. Longing

Source : Yohanis P. Kangganam (2025)

The work, titled *Kerinduan* (2025) is one such work, based on a concept that follows the story of the spirit mask itself. It depicts an Asmat man sitting alone, sewing a spirit mask in the middle of the forest. The sewn spirit mask is made from mulberry bark fiber, young sago leaves, wood, bamboo, feathers, and seeds. The body and shoulders are made of rattan using a single-stem weaving technique. In the background, there are several sago trees, which hold profound philosophical significance for the Papuan people, symbolizing simplicity, independence, connection with nature, and social and communal values. These trees are not only a source of food but also an integral part of the Papuan people's cultural identity and way of life. Mangrove trees also represent the distinctive characteristics of the Asmat region, a region dominated by lowlands, mostly swamps and coastal areas facing the Arafura Sea. Weaving is a technique for creating objects or works by interlacing or overlapping materials, such as plant fibers, cloth, or other materials, to create a strong unity and form a specific pattern. Weaving is not just about creating a product; it always conveys a much larger message: strengthening the bonds of brotherhood. The weaving process demonstrates how to arrange something neatly and orderly, symbolizing the order of the universe and the interconnectedness of its elements. A single piece of woven material will not yield a strong finished product. Weaving represents the importance of cooperation and unity, where many small parts come together to create a greater strength. Each stick or strand of woven material has its own strength, but when put together, they form a strong and sturdy structure, reflecting the strength born of togetherness in the Asmat community. Weaving also has artistic and aesthetic value, where natural materials are processed into aesthetically pleasing products with cultural value.

B. The Journey of the Spirit Mask from the Forest to the Village

There are two traditional ceremonies typically performed using these spirit masks. The first is the *Jiwi* ceremony, in which the spirits are depicted as ancestors returning to the village to celebrate with the living, releasing their longing for each

other before returning to the spirit world. There are two types of spirit clothing. The first is the spirit clothing, which depicts deceased family members, typically consisting of two to twenty garments. The second is the conical spirit clothing, which depicts an orphan figure in Asmat mythology. The spirit clothing is woven by men in the forest. After the *Jiwi* ceremony, the clothing is left to rot under a banyan or sago tree. This practice is believed by the Asmat people to bring fertility to the forest and their lives. The tree where the clothing rots is considered sacred and must not be cut down. The author then used these folk tales and the philosophy contained within them as inspiration for his paintings. It is his hope that the culture and traditions of the Asmat people will be known and appreciated by the wider community, especially the younger generation.



Figure 3. Release Longing
Source : Yohanis P. Kangganam (2025)

The work titled *Melepas Rindu* (Figure 3) is a painting that tells the story of the journey of ancestors heading to their village to meet relatives and relieve their longing before finally returning to the spirit world. Bridges connect two separate realms: the real world inhabited by humans and the spirit world inhabited by ancestral spirits. Bridges physically connect two places separated by obstacles such as rivers, valleys, or ravines. Philosophically, bridges symbolize the connection between individuals, groups, or even generations. Bridges can unite people from diverse backgrounds, becoming a symbol of unity and togetherness. Each step on a bridge can be interpreted as a journey through life, with the beginning and end points symbolizing the phases of life. Forests provide abundant natural resources for human survival. Furthermore, forests play a vital role in human life, the ecosystem, and the universe as a whole. The trees in the forest, especially the older ones, teach us resilience in the face of various weather and time. Forests also teach us about togetherness, where all living things are interdependent and work together. Forests are a symbol of life itself, providing oxygen, water, and various resources needed by humans and other living things.



Figure 4. Destination

Source : Yohanis P. Kangganam (2025)

The work titled *Destination* (Figure 4) is a mixed-media artwork. The meaning is that the spirit mask traveling to the village has one goal: to reunite with its long-lost family, returning not in its usual form but as a spirit mask. Mangrove forests represent the coastal region of Asmat. Mangroves, with their strong root systems, act as natural barriers, protecting the coast from waves, storm surges, and erosion. Mangroves help maintain the balance of coastal ecosystems by filtering sediment, absorbing pollutants, and mitigating the impacts of climate change. Mangrove forests teach us that humans and nature are interdependent. The preservation of mangrove forests will benefit humans, and conversely, humans are responsible for preserving them. Bark itself represents a typical Papuan painting medium in Asei Pulau Village, East Sentani District, Jayapura Regency, Papua. Painting on bark is an ancestral heritage that has been passed down through generations for the people of Asei Pulau Village. They use bark as a medium for painting. A single stick, standing alone, does not possess significant strength. However, when many sticks are tied together, they become a powerful and efficient cleaning tool. The concept of the stick broom is also the basis of the culture of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) in Indonesian society. *Gotong royong* is a form of cooperation and mutual assistance that has long been practiced in everyday life. Overall, the broom stick is a powerful symbol of unity and collective strength. It reminds us that we are stronger when we unite and work together. Sand beads: The small, sturdy shape of the sand beads symbolizes resilience and strength. This can be interpreted as the ability to survive in various conditions and maintain its original shape. The fade-resistant sand beads symbolize eternal beauty. This can be interpreted as values or principles that remain enduring despite the passage of time. The use of sand beads to lock the lines in beadwork demonstrates the order and precision in the creation process. This can be interpreted as the importance of accuracy and care in achieving a goal.

C. Playing with Masks in Honoring Ancestors

The first to appear is a cone-shaped woven mask, which in some regions represents *Mbanma*, a legendary orphan who appears as a humorous opening act. He jumps around playfully while being pelted with leaves and coconut husks by children. The next day, he accompanies the official arrival of the deceased. The work, entitled *Memory* (Figure 5), is one of the paintings that takes us back to the spirit mask ritual, where several people are seen delivering the spirit masks as the opening act of the masked party. This cone-shaped mask, which has no arms or body, is the mask worn at the opening of the spirit party. In the background of the painting stands a *Jew house* or *rumah bujang* house, a traditional house of the Asmat tribe that serves as a place for traditional ceremonies. The Jew House is one of the traditional houses originating from the Asmat Tribe. The *Jew House*, which has several other names, namely *Je*, *Jeu*, *Yeu*, or *Yai*, is the name for the *bujang* house in the regional languages of each group in the Asmat Regency. This is a rectangular stilt house made of wood, with walls and a roof made of woven sago or *nipah* palm leaves. A unique feature of this Jew House is that it uses no nails at all, but instead uses rattan roots as connectors. It is called the *Bujang* House because this house is where unmarried or single men gather. Children under 10 years old, and women, are not allowed to enter the *Jew House*. The spear held is a symbol of courage and leadership. A spear is generally a weapon consisting of a long stick with a sharp point or point, used for stabbing or throwing. Spears are traditional weapons, used for hunting, war, and self-defense. In some cultures, spears are also used in rituals or traditional ceremonies. In Indonesia, spears are often considered heirlooms that hold spiritual value and represent the wisdom of ancestors. Some types of spears are still used in traditional events or cultural festivals as part of traditional performing arts.



Figure 5. Memory

Source : Yohanis P. Kangganam (2025)

4. CONCLUSION

The Spirit Mask Tradition is a cultural tradition formed and passed down from generation to generation by our ancestors to be preserved. Therefore, it can be concluded that by using weaving or sewing techniques from sago leaves, the community creates spirit masks, which are then adapted into creative ideas using painting techniques. This research is

expected to contribute to knowledge about the customs and traditions of the Asmat tribe and can be used as a national archive. This research still has limitations in more detailed and in-depth data, so the author hopes this research can provide opportunities for further research.

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