

Ci Opak, Jis Opak (No Canoe, No Firewood): An Economic Dimension of the Asmat Canoe

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Abstract:

Ci is an integral part of daily life for the people of Asmat region, for geographically it is located in the lowlands and in the middle of the very broad swamp area in Papua, Indonesia. Since the rivers separate as well as connect one place from another, having a *ci* becomes a habitus of Asmat people. *Ci* means a canoe in the Asmat language. *Ci* is a very important cultural material to meet the needs of daily life, both personal and communal. One of the very basic Asmat expression is “*Ci opak, jis opak*” (no canoe, no firewood). This means that a family cannot live without a canoe because the most simple things like firewood for cooking are not available. Therefore, *ci* is fundamental in the life of Asmat people. Unfortunately, *ci* tends to be shifted or even replaced by motorised transport, while the Asmat people themselves give less attention to preserve it. As a result, they become powerless and are often described like a man who “*cemen opak*” (does not have a penis) or who is impotent that he is marginalised in the various fields of life.

Keywords:

- *Asmat* • bitni • cemen opak • ci • ci opak • dusun • jis opak
- jouse opak • *power* • *family* • *fertility* • *symbol* • *habitus*

Introduction

Ci is the Asmat word for dugout canoe. The *ci* is an integral part of the everyday life of the Asmat people because their region is located geographically in the lowlands and in the middle of a huge tidal swampy area (see Kunst 1977:19; Pouwer 2010:103). Asmat is an ethnic group of Indonesia residing in Papua province, the easternmost part of Indonesia (see Suter 1982:10), and formerly called Irian Jaya. The Asmat area is surrounded by countless of large and small rivers and jungles (Trenkenshuh 1970:9). The *ci* is very fundamental in the lives of the Asmats (see Ap and Johsz Mansoben 1974:62). It helps them to fulfil their daily needs. The Asmats articulate how the *ci* cannot be separated from their life. In this article, I elaborate some Asmat expressions about the position of the *ci* as a primary need of the family and the community. I conducted a fieldwork about the Asmats' way of live in January – May 2012. In addition, prior to this anthropological fieldwork, I lived and worked with the Asmat people in December 2002 – January 2008 as a domestic missionary of the Order of the Holy Cross (OSC). Methodologically, I conducted some KIIs (Key Informant Interviews), FGDs (Focus Group Discussions), Participant Observations, and Feedback Seminar as data gathering techniques. That is why most of my data are basically firsthand data.

Relationship Between the *Ci*, *Jis*, and *Jouse*

Traditionally, the Asmats cook their food using firewood gathered from the *dusun*.¹ It is easy to gather firewood if their house is built next to a *dusun* because they just walk to get it. Unfortunately, many Asmats build their houses not in the middle of a *dusun*, but in a village. This means many of them stay far from their *dusun* which is not accessible by foot because the Asmat area is surrounded by rivers. Consequently, they need the *ci* to be able to reach their *dusun* and to gather their needs, including firewood. Therefore, the “*Ci opak, jis opak*” statement is indeed relevant to the Asmats.



Plate 1. Two Asmat men are bringing firewood in their *ci*.

The Asmats prefer to use a metaphorical word or a symbolic behavior to communicate their needs or emotions. For instance, if a neighbor named Helen, for example, wants to borrow a *ci* from Maria, Maria then would not say directly that the *ci* cannot be borrowed at the moment. Rather, she would say (while looking at the fireplace or *jouse* in Asmat language), “Oh, there is no firewood at the fireplace. Moreover, last night this little girl cried loudly because there was no fish in her sago.” These words will be well understood by Helen that the *ci* cannot be borrowed at the moment because the owner will use it. Similarly, the Asmats use metaphorical words “*Ci opak, jis opak*” to express their dependency on the *ci*. The *ci* is highly valuable to fulfil their daily needs.

Furthermore, by saying “*jis opak*”, the Asmats actually want to say that they have no food; there is nothing to cook; nothing to eat. Remember, firewood is very important for cooking activities in Asmat. Without firewood, they will not be able to cook. Nothing to cook means, nothing to eat. In other words, “*jis opak*” implies hunger to the Asmats. As a result, sooner or later, they would die or “*habis*” (literally meaning, finished). Therefore, the *ci* is very essential to keep the Asmats alive because they can look for firewood to be able to cook their food and then eat joyfully. Plate 2 shows symbolically the relationship between hearth and the paddle/*ci*.



Plate 2. Fireplace and paddles in the Catholic Church of Sawa-Erma Parish, Asmat.

In this article, by simply quoting what my informants have said, I would try to demonstrate how the Asmat people express their dependency and intimacy with the *ci*. Even if the informants expressed their ideas differently, all expressions have the same meaning, that is, the *ci* is very vital to the everyday life of the Asmats.

When I met Beny² (Fieldnote, p.39), chieftain of an Asmat village of Atsj district, he was very happy and he seriously answered my research questions. The following sentences are part of his answers.

“Kalau tidak punya perahu, akan sangat tergantung pada orang lain. Tidak memiliki perahu juga bisa dimengerti sebagai keluarga pemalas. Kalau tidak punya perahu, kita merasa sangat kecewa karena tidak bisa mencari makan. Perahu menjamin hidup keluarga, bahkan menjadi penyambung kehidupan sehari-hari karena bisa menyeberang sungai-sungai yang luas dan dalam.”

Without *ci*, a family will be very dependent on others. Not owning a *ci* implies a lazy family. If they do not own a *ci*, they feel very sad because they will not be able to look for food. The *ci* guarantees the family needs; it connects their daily life because it transports them to cross big and deep rivers.

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intimacy with the *ci*. Even if the informants expressed their ideas differently, all expressions have the same meaning, that is, the *ci* is very vital to the everyday life of the Asmats.

Another saying was articulated by Prabu, a senior teacher and one of the tribal leaders of Atsj. According to him,

“Perahu dan dayung merupakan focus hidup orang Asmat atau jantung hidup orang Asmat. Perahu merupakan jembatan untuk mencapai penghidupan; sarana paling utama dalam memenuhi kebutuhan hidup keluarga. Perahu memungkinkan orang untuk bergerak: melanjutkan kehidupan yang diturunkan turun-temurun dari leluhur. Perahu juga merupakan alat dasar untuk penghidupan.”

The *ci* and oar are the focus or core of the Asmats' life. The *ci* is a bridge to reach livelihood; it is a main instrument to fulfil the needs of a family. It is a guarantee for mobility and continuing the ancestors' lives. The *ci* is a basic tool for life.

In my opinion, one of the important elements that is needed to be highlighted from Prabu's statement is “continuing the ancestors lives.” Why is this important? Because the present generation comes from previous generations, that is, their ancestors. If the present generation of the Asmats abandon the *ci*, it means they have no more respect for their ancestors who used and introduced the *ci* for future generations (see Schneebaum 1985:40). They do not want to continue the ancestors' lives and spirits that had been passed down to them. In other words, they have no more fear of ancestral spirits. If this happens, the community life of the Asmats will be in disharmony because the spirits are also part of the community. If the ancestral spirits go away with anger, the living people will be in danger. All Asmats are aware of the consequence of neglecting the *ci*. Therefore, it is very important to preserve the *ci* in order to keep the community always in harmony.

Todis (Fieldnote, p.45), about 70 years old, (because he himself does not know his own age), a tribal chief, in a very simple expression said, “*Kalau tidak ada perahu dan dayung, tidak ada kayu bakar, tidak ada makan. Kalau ada perahu, hidup kita baik.*” (If there is no *ci* and paddle, there would no firewood, no food. If there is a *ci*, our lives will be good). From his words, I figure out the title of this article, “*Ci opak, jis opak.*” Although Todis spoke in a very simple *bahasa* Indonesia, he can formulate his ideas effectively. It was a big favor to

meet and interview him because in my opinion, he is one of the tribal leaders who is wise and a gifted man. His statement was validated by a group of carver of Yasiw-Atsj (Fieldnote, p.49) when they said,

“Perahu, dayung, dan alat pangkur sagu merupakan kekayaan utama orang Asmat. Perahu merupakan kunci hidup orang Asmat. Kalau tidak ada perahu, kayu bakar tidak akan tersedia apalagi sagu dan kebutuhan lain.”

Ci, paddle, and sago pounder are Asmat treasures. The *ci* is a key for Asmat life. Without *ci*, there is no firewood, no sago, and no other needs.

A different idea from the group is that “the *ci* is a key for Asmat life.” The group used the word 'key'; perhaps they got the idea of a key to a speedboat machine. A key is needed to turn on the speedboat. If there is no key, the speedboat will not function. So, the group used the perspective of a “key” to see their lives that without a *ci* is similar to a speedboat without its key. It means the Asmat life will function well if the people own *ci*.

Aside from the statement “*ci opak, jis opak*”, I also try to underline the Todis' saying “*Kalau ada perahu, hidup kita baik.*” (If there is a *ci*, our lives will be good). For me, this statement not only tells us about food or physical needs, but more importantly, about our well-being. It is about the feeling of being happy physically, psychologically, and spiritually. In contrast, without *ci*, Asmat life will be terrible. This is similar to what Paulinus said, “*Yang tidak punya perahu, kasihan sama sekali: perahu kaki tangan yang bisa mengantarkan ke tujuan.*” (Those who do not own a *ci* are pitiful: the *ci* is like hands and legs to reach one's goal).

Doni (Fieldnote, p.55), one of the Asmat *wow-ipits* (sculptor) and *cisi-ipits* (talented *ci* maker) from Atsj, was a little bit emotional when he stated, “*Tidak ada perahu, sama dengan tidak ada makanan, dan tidak makan sama dengan mati.*” (No *ci* means, no food and without food means, death). As a *wow-ipits* and *cisi-ipits*, Doni knew well that food is very basic for his life. Without food, he will have no energy to create such remarkable woodcarvings. The *ci* is very essential in looking for food, both in the water and in the forest. That is why, in conjunction with Doni, Yanuar (Fieldnote, p.6) argued that,

“Kalau tidak ada perahu kebutuhan rumah akan kosong. Kalau tidak kenal perahu dan dayung, berarti 'mata hidup' sebagai orang Asmat hilang. Untuk cari makan jadi susah. Tidak bisa cari makan secara cepat.”

If there is no *ci*, the house will be empty. If the Asmats abandon the *ci* and the paddle, it means the source of Asmat life is extinct. Looking for food becomes difficult. We cannot instantly look for food.

Yanuar used a new term in his explanation: “*mata hidup*.” Literally, ‘*mata*’ means eye, and ‘*hidup*’ means life. However, in this context, the meaning of “*mata hidup*” is the source of life. At the same time, we can also imagine how difficult it is to be a blind person. So, if there is no *ci*, life will be very difficult just like a blind person facing his or her life. If you own a *ci*, you can see (your eyes can see), and you can fulfil your own needs as well as the needs of others.

Nikanor (Fieldnote, p.11), a former member of the local legislative of Asmat, emphasized a different thing. Most probably because of his former position in public service, Nikanor was able to look closely at his individual responsibility in the society. He said, “*Seseorang yang tidak punya perahu menandakan orang tidak bertanggungjawab sehingga menjadi tergantung, dan jadi tidak bebas.*” (A person without a *ci* symbolizes an irresponsible person, so he becomes a dependent person, and has no freedom). It is very true that a person or a family without *ci* is dependent on others. They have no idea how to go farther or how to go to their *dusun* to gather firewood or to pound sago. In connection to this topic, I remember the Yopranus’ (Fieldnote, p.31) story about living in a village. According to his story,

“*Di kampung-kampung sudah banyak orang yang tidak memiliki perahu. Lebih banyak juga yang sudah tidak tahu membuat perahu. Akibatnya mereka hanya ikut-ikutan orang lain untuk cari makan. Atau meminjam perahu orang lain. Sebagai contoh, saya membeli perahu dari mereka, lalu mereka sendiri yang datang pinjam silih berganti setiap hari.*”

There are many people who own no *ci* in villages. There are a lot of men who do not know how to make a *ci*. Consequently, they just follow other people to look for food or borrowing other's *ci*. For example, I bought a *ci* from them, but then they come to me everyday to borrow the *ci*.

It is funny and ironic, not only for me but also for Yopranus because the villagers sold the *ci* to him, but then they are the main users of the *ci*. Indeed, it is ironic because they received the money but then they were the people who used the *ci*, so they got double profits. Meanwhile, Yopranus, as the owner, got the title only—that the *ci* is his property. Yopranus is not a native Asmat, that is why he was so surprised with the fact that the Asmats, the natives, do not own a *ci*. His ancestor came from another part of Papua and moved to Asmat decades ago. He is a *pendeta* (Protestant pastor) and now he is one of the local legislative members. As a legislator, he knows very well the *ci*'s availability in every Asmat village because he visits those villages frequently. Although he is not a native Asmat, but he feels sad to observe the present

reality that many villagers of Asmat do not preserve the *ci* as a means of their livelihood.

It is very interesting to note that only one of my informants connected the *ci* to sin. She was Sinaria (Fieldnote, p.60) from Sawa village. She confidently told me:

“Tidak punya perahu sama dengan berdosa karena Tuhan Allah sudah menciptakan dan menyediakan kayu untuk dijadikan perahu, tetapi tidak membuatnya.”

Not owning a *ci* is considered to having committed a sin because the Lord God has created and provided wood abundantly for making *ci*, but why you do not make it.

Sinaria is one of the talented and artistic Asmat women who designs mats and bags. In the Asmat views, she is one of the *cescu cepes* (great or talented women – see Konrad [ed.] 2002: 87). According to Father Vincensius, the parish priest of Sawa-Erma parish, Sinaria is a great and honorable woman because she knows a lot of things about her traditions and without fear says so to others, even before men. That is why Father Vincensius strongly recommended that I interview Sinaria. I found her very charming, friendly, intelligent, and has a good sense of humor. She was very serious when she talked about the *ci*. The *ci* for her is not only a personal and social responsibility to society, but also to the Lord God, our Creator. The *ci* harmonizes the relationship among members of a community, as well as the relationship between human beings and God.

Last but not the least, in my FGD with Barani and Donaire, I found that their ideas cover almost all key words that have been discussed earlier. For example, to emphasize the importance of the *ci* in Asmat life, they used words such as 'key', 'dead', and 'fireplace'. Precisely they said,

“Keluarga yang tidak punya perahu dan dayung sama dengan mati: tidak ada kesan hidup di dalam rumah tangga karena ke mana-mana mencari makanan dengan perantaraan perahu. Maka, perahu merupakan kunci kehidupan Asmat. Tidak punya perahu sama dengan tidak punya tungku.”

A family who does not own a *ci* and paddle is equivalent to dead: there is no sign of life because going somewhere to look for food not without the *ci*. Therefore, the *ci* is a key for Asmat life. Not owning a *ci* is considered as not owning a fireplace.

From these statements, we can see that although each person has not used the same words or sentences to express his or her vital relationship with the *ci*, they all agreed with one thing: the *ci* is very essential and cannot be alienated from the daily life of the Asmats. The *ci* is an integral part of the Asmats' *habitus*.

***Ci* for Men, *Jouse* for Women**

More than just being a son of a mother, the *ci* is considered as male. This consideration perhaps comes from the comparison between men and the *ci*. Both men and the *ci* share a similar capability and function, particularly in terms of physical power. The Asmat people believe on men's power to protect, help, facilitate, and transport his fellow men and goods from one place to another. The *ci*, on the other hand, has the power to bring and transport people and goods from one place to another. The *ci* transports people to cross rivers and enter jungles. It is a guarantee for Asmat mobility. There is an Asmats' saying, "*Kalau ada perahu, rumah jadi panas.*" (If there is a *ci*, our house becomes hot or if there is a *ci*, our fireplace has light). It means, the *ci* makes them alive and happy because there is something to eat. I guess, eating is a very happy moment for the Asmats. The statement is based from my experiences and observations when I was a parish priest of Agats diocese in Asmat. For instance, when we had a meeting in a parish or a village and people know that the committee had provided food or drinks for the participants, this made the people come. However, if they know that there is no food, no drink, and no cigarette to be provided for the meeting, only a few would come. Again, eating makes the Asmats happy and enthusiastic. Therefore, it makes sense that the burning fireplace is a symbol of life, a symbol of existence, and a symbol of happiness. With respect to the *ci*, the *ci* keeps the fireplace burning and family life happy. Plate 3 demonstrates how the Asmats use their *ci* for fishing.

I was very surprised when I first conducted interviews. I heard the saying: "*Ci opak, cemen opak.*" It means a man who does not own a *ci* is considered impotent. It literally means, no canoe (*ci*), no penis (*cemen*). Armando and Barani are both educated Asmats, acknowledged the saying as a general belief in the Asmat society. The *ci* is very important for the Asmats, just like the penis for a man. A man without a penis, is not a complete man because he is not able to fulfil his duty as male. In other words, a penis is a symbol of being a male. The penis identifies a male when he is born. It is biologically given, that a human being is considered as male because of his penis. So, if a

man has no penis, how could people define him because he is not a woman either. Having a penis is a basic essence and existence of being a man. Therefore, it is very embarrassing if an Asmat man has no penis or is impotent because he cannot attract a female.



Plate 3. A man with his young boy catching fish by casting net on the *ai*.
(Photograph courtesy of Fr. Eduar Daeli, OSC).



Plate 4. *Jouse* (hearths) inside a *jen*. The Asmats use the *jouse* for cooking and also to warm their drums when they are fitting the sound. Likewise, they can use the rack above the fireplace to place their valuable belongings such as drum, spear, bow and arrow, shield, paddle, and carving.

(Photograph courtesy of Fr. Eduar Daeli, OSC).

Aside from “*Ci opak, cemen opak*,” there is also a similar saying that states: “*Ci opak, jouse opak*.” *Jouse* means hearth or fireplace. So, literally it means, “No *ci*, no fireplace.” This can be interpreted as if you do not own a *ci*, you would not be able to provide neither transportation nor food for yourself and your family. Without *ci*, your fireplace is cold because there is no fire to cook something. If your fireplace is cold, it also means you have no energy because you have nothing to eat. So, “*Ci opak, jouse opak*” implies a lot of meanings. It leads people to the inner core of Asmat life.

For the Asmats, fireplace is very vital, aside from the *ci* itself. Fireplace is a symbol of family life. If the fireplace of a family house is smoky, it means they are still alive. Likewise, the fireplace in a *jeu*³ symbolizes the existence of a clan (see Plate 4). If a person or a family does not have a fireplace in a *jeu*, it means he is no longer part of that *jeu*; he is considered as an outsider or stranger. Fire on the fireplace symbolizes spirit, life, and power. Thus, the Asmats always keep the fire alive or keep the fireplace lighted in order to keep the spirit alive. Normally, one way to keep the fireplace burning is to cook something on it, such as sago, fish, or other kinds of food. If you have no more fire in your fireplace, it implies that you have no more spirit to live.

A man who does not own a *ci* is similar to a man who does not have a penis or a family who does not own a fireplace. The *ci*, *cemen* (penis), and *jouse* (fireplace) are all important things in Asmat society. The *ci* is a symbol of mobility and power. The *jouse* is a symbol of life of a family, while *cemen* is a symbol of fertility and power. Penis has the ability to penetrate a woman's vagina, which means a new creation, new generation, or new life comes on earth. The penis engenders life through its power to ejaculate sperm into a woman's body. A man who has no penis or is impotent loses the opportunity to create new life or to continue his generation, through sexual intercourse. The Asmats perceive the *ci* in the same manner as it is essential as a penis for a man. The *ci* can cross rivers and enter jungles, just like *cemen* (penis) can enter *cen* (vagina). The penis arouses and stimulates the vagina to undergo such a joyful experience. Penis brings hope, fertility, and happiness to create a new life. In a similar way, the *ci* brings about happiness to a family and society to produce more food and other needs. Therefore, the *ci* is indeed identical to masculinity. This description is accentuated by Armando (Fieldnote, p.22) as he said,

“Kalau seorang laki-laki tidak punya perahu dapat dianggap sebagai 'cowut' (perempuan) yang hanya menerima saja. Dia tidak bisa memanas, tidak bisa menembusi vagina. Kalau tidak ada penis, suasana jadi dingin, tidak menarik. Demikian pula, bila tidak punya perahu suasana keluarga jadi 'jif' (dingin) karena tungku tidak menyala. Namun, kalau ada perahu suasana keluarga menjadi 'amop' (panas), seperti laki-laki yang agresif penuh nafsu memanas perempuan.”

A man who owns no *ci* is considered as *cowut* (female) who can only receive. He is not able to arouse the desire and is incapable of penetrating the vagina. If there is no penis, no desire, and the situation of life is cold and uninteresting. Likewise, if there is no *ci*, the situation in a family becomes *jif* (cold) because the fireplace has no fire. But, if there is a *ci*, the situation of a family becomes *amop* (hot), just like a man who aggressively stimulates the woman's desire.

When I asked this question, “What would be the woman's symbol, if the *ci* is the man's symbol?” Emmanuel, a curator of Agats Museum in Asmat, explained that the fireplace could be accepted as a woman's symbol. Fireplace belongs to women because most of their activities are related to it. For example, it is the women's responsibility to gather firewood and to cook food. So, it is reasonable if *jouse* (fireplace) symbolizes women in Asmat society.

In addition, *Bis pole*⁴ (ancestor figures – see Plate 5) ritual, after a series of rituals in a *jen*, the *bino* (lower pointed end of the *Bis pole*) is implanted into the ground in a major ceremony in the middle of sago grove (see Kuruwaib 1974:78). According to Kuruwaib, there are five meanings associated with the *bis*, i.e.: (1) Symbol of ancestral presence; (2) Reminder of revenge-obligation, (3) Physical and spiritual health; (4) Fertility, and (5) Beauty (1974:38-40). In conjunction with the male and female symbols, I want to emphasize the meaning of fertility in relation to the *bis*. The very obvious symbol of fertility of the *bis* is a representation of the phallus, *bis cemen*, and the vagina, *bis cen* and frequently the depiction of a turtle (see Kuruwaib 1974:39). Moreover, to assure the fertility of the sago trees, the *bis* is transported and implanted to the ground. The implantation itself is a symbol of sexual intercourse between the spirit and the land, so the fertile land bears fruits for the benefit of the community. In the same manner, the penis penetrates a vagina for procreation.



Plate 5. *Bis* poles in the Agats Museum.

Power over *Dusun*

The *ci* is a symbol of man's power,⁵ especially power over his *dusun*. According to my informants, the first *dusun* division system was based on the river waterways. It means the rivers were the borders of the *dusuns*. An example is the Catholic mission's compound around the Atsj parish center. The piece of land was donated decades ago by the ancestors of Atsj to the Catholic mission through the former parish priest of St. Paulus Atsj. It is very interesting to me because the boundaries of the donated land follow the two river basins: from the Pit and Ndatimits river estuaries until where the rivers come and flow into the middle of the jungle. The boundaries are still valid until today, though some villages use the area for farming. Therefore, to identify and ultimately control his *dusun*, *sine qua non*, one must own a *ci*. Without the *ci*, he will not be able to reach the boundaries of his *dusun*.

The disadvantage of not owning a *ci* is that a *dusun* cannot be maintained and it could easily be accessible to outsiders. The *dusun* is believed to be a mother or a wife who could bear and nurture new life. Such is the *dusun* that grows sago, the staple food of the Asmats; it grows trees which are very useful for them to live, and provides countless varieties of animals that can be

taken as food. The *dusun* is not only an empty land, but it has everything in it, including rivers, trees, sago, and animals. Thus, the *dusun* is very important for the Asmats. The *dusun* is the ancestral domain of the Asmats.

When someone does not own a *ci*, it means he has no power to control, maintain, and preserve the source of his life. It is similar to one who could not protect his wife from the enemy's attack. If a man lets everybody else to enter his *dusun* freely, it is similar to allowing his wife to be raped by other men. Therefore, owning a *ci* is not only a symbol of power, but also a symbol of responsibility and protection, both to his wife and to his possessions, including a *dusun*. Another meaning of responsibility to the wife is that a husband will be able to support his wife by giving her a *ci*, so that she could go anywhere to meet the needs of her family. Thus, it is very natural that Paulinus (Fieldnote, p.47) said that, "Every single wife would be very happy to hear that her husband had cut down a tree for making a *ci*." It is good news for her because she would be able to find food for them and meet all the needs of the family without waiting for other's help by lending their *ci* to them. If a household does not own a *ci*, the wife would go to borrow a *ci* from their neighbor, or just follow others to find food for her family. As such, she is separated from the control of her husband. If a wife leaves her husband, in a sense it could be interpreted to mean that the husband loses his power to control his wife. So, to maintain power, a man should provide a *ci* for him and his family.

Do not Call Him *Bitni*

According to Sinaria, a man who does not have a *ci* can be called as *bitni* (knows nothing to work). Therefore, fighting or quarreling in a household can take place if there is no *ci*, for the husband cannot do anything. Providing the *ci* is one of the man's responsibilities. It is reasonable for his wife to ask him for a *ci*.

It is possible that other people can humiliate a family who do not own a *ci* because they cannot live on their own. If a man is called *bitni*, it means he is considered an impotent, a man who does not have initiative or a man who knows nothing but to eat. Thus, his status as a real man is nil. He is similar to someone who does not have a penis (*cemen opak*) because he is not capable of performing his duties as a male, that of piercing the vagina. Of course, an Asmat man is not willing to be called *bitni* or *cemen opak* because it is very insulting. Self-esteem for an Asmat man is very important, that is why he has to prove and defend it. Therefore, in order not to be called a *bitni* or a *cemen*

opak, an Asmat man must own a *ci* as a proof that he is a “*Asmat nak*” (real man – see Fleischhacker 1991:3; Schieffelin 1976:9; Ndepi 2012), a person who knows how to work. It does not matter if a husband is not a *cisi-ipits* (talented *ci* maker), he can ask help or hire someone else to make a *ci* on his behalf. Owning a *ci* is a symbol of initiative, responsibility, and power.

One Family in One *Ci*

In a feedback seminar about the Asmat culture held in Agats on April 30, 2012, a participant asked: "In a war *ci*, who can get in, anyone or just the immediate family? The question was answered directly by Barani. He said, "In conjunction with war, a clan or a close family stays in the same *ci*. However, there are specific customary provisions. Later on, the *cesmaipits* (*kepala perang*, big man or war lord – see Posposil 1963:48; Plate 6) in that *ci* will examine the readiness of the people who want to go to war. If a man is not ready, then he cannot go to war. His readiness is also related to his relationship with his spouse because one of the taboos during the war season is having no sex with any woman, including his wife. If everything is okay, so everybody in that *ci* can participate" (Notulensi 2012:4). This explanation can be interpreted as family unity in a *ci*. The *ci* apparently unites the family members, both the living and dead. The representation of the deceased family member appears in the form of the carvings in the *ci* (see Fleischhacker 1991:4). The spirits of the ancestors from the same family are believed to support their families who are fighting in a battlefield. In addition, the shape of the *ci* itself symbolizes oneness of the people in it. The *ci* unites them to go to the same destination by paddling it together, and nobody among them would paddle to the opposite direction.



Plate 6. Paddling the *ci* together. Standing at the middle with ornamented paddle is *cesmaipits* or tribal leader. (Photograph courtesy of Fr. Eduar Daeli, OSC).

Each clan has its own *cesmaipits*. A *cesmaipits* has limited authority over his own clan or close family. He has no authority over other clans or *cis*. Above all, a stranger should not be allowed to get into the *ci* if nobody knows him or his intentions. He could either be a good or bad person for the clan. So, the Asmats would not allow anybody to enter their *ci* if they do not know him personally. The *ci* therefore becomes a symbol of unity and strength to a clan or family. It is a symbol of a household life.

In an interview with Davadilla, conducted beside the new *ci* that he is making behind his house in Ewer, I asked him, "Why is a *jicap ci* carved at the *ci cimen* and all around the *ci*?" With smile and confidence he answered, "*Ukiran perahu merupakan symbol kehadiran roh-roh nenek moyang. Jadi, jika sekeliling perahu diukir, itu berarti roh-roh menjaga dan menguatkan perahu tersebut secara menyeluruh*" (Fieldnote, p.34) – (The carving in the *ci* is a symbol of the presence of ancestral spirits. If the *ci* is carved entirely, it means the spirits protect and strengthen the whole *ci*). I was amazed by his answer because what I know is that Asmat carvings represent the ancestor's spirits. I did not think that the carvings around the *ci* represent the integrity and protection of the ancestors for the whole *ci* and the people in it. This means that the power of the ancestral spirits dwell entirely in the *ci*. If they carve only a certain part, the spirit's power may be limited to stay only in that specific part of the *ci*. However, if they carve completely all around the *ci*, it means the protection of the spirit over the *ci* is infinite. The strength and the power of the spirits encompass the entire *ci*. A challenging question is thereby posed: What is the role of the ancestral spirits if the *ci* is already extinct?

Conclusion

According to Pikei (Fieldnote, p.49), prior to any party or feast, the *cis* should be made available first. As I have mentioned earlier, if there are no *cis* and no paddles, a ritual feast should not be arranged. The *ci* and the paddles are very essential because these are guarantees that all needs for the ritual feast to be celebrated will be provided. Basically, the *ci* is a primary need that will provide the secondary needs.

The *cis* in the past are also a measurement on the readiness to go on war or headhunting. It is a big honor to win the war or to take many heads if the *cis* are excellent. Conversely, if the *cis* are of low quality, they are heavy, and can easily be damaged. This can be a good chance for the enemy to win the war or to take as many victims because the people in the *cis* will not be able to escape in case of emergency. Thus, the *cis* are prerequisite for any festive occasion

and are a symbol of readiness to arrange a warfare or headhunting activity. It means that if a clan or a family wants to win a warfare or raid, they must prepare their *ais* seriously, otherwise they will succumb to the enemy.

Furthermore, some of my informants expressed their attachment with the *ai*. In this article, I want to highlight some ideas that can show the economic dimension of the *ai*. For me, it is easier to state the disadvantages of not owning a *ai*, rather than the advantages of owning a *ai* because the Asmats can do many things using the *ai*. This is why I prefer to examine the economical implications of not owning a *ai*.

First, the *ai* is a basic need for the Asmats. As already mentioned, the *ai* is part of the Asmats' *habitus*, so not owning a *ai* brings about difficulties in their lives. Metaphorically, the Asmats articulate this through the saying *ai opak, jis opak*. If a family does not own a *ai*, it would be very difficult for them to go fishing, hunting, and gathering. The *ai* facilitates them to meet their needs. In other words, without a *ai*, a family will go hungry. If they are hungry they will have no energy to work or to produce something for their own lives and for the community. Therefore, economically, they might become a dependent family or society because they could not afford to produce such products even for domestic use only.

In addition, the *ai* is a means of transportation. The *ai* helps people to go anywhere and to transport goods from one place to another. That is why a family will spend a lot of money for transportation if they do not own a *ai*. In other words, one of the advantages of owing a *ai* is to save energy and money. The *ai* itself is useful in making money. For example, prior to the establishment of a wharf in Atsj and Agats, people used the *ai* to reach the ship which is at the middle of the river. At that time, the owners of *ais* earned much money transporting people and goods to and from the ship. Furthermore, the *ai* can be bartered (see Heady 2005:262) with other goods or services, although this rarely happened.

Second, the *ai* makes clearer the division of labor between men and women. The *ai* makers are men, while the firewood gatherers are women. This means the availability of the *ai* is men's responsibility. If there is no *ai*, the women will not be able to gather firewood and other needs. Thus, the *ai* clearly shows the difference between men and women's responsibilities, but at the same time stresses the complementary work of both men and women. On the one hand, a woman can do her responsibilities such as gathering firewood and fishing because of the availability of the *ai* which is made by a man. On the other hand, a man is able to make a *ai* because of the energy that comes from food and drinks provided by the woman. Hence, the *ai* motivates

everybody in the family to fulfil their responsibilities for the sake of all the members of the family. The *ci* creates a productive person who can become a producer of things rather than a consumer. The members of a family will be totally dependent on others if they do not own a *ci*, including the search for food.

Third, not owning a *ci* brings results to the non-maintenance of the *dusun*. A *dusun* is the ancestral domain of the Asmats. *Dusun* provides many things for the Asmats such as sago (their staple food), a countless variety of animals that can be taken as food, wood for many purposes, and the river contains many seafoods. Economically, the Asmats take everything from the *dusun* to sustain their lives, including the *ci* tree. However, the Asmats can reach the *dusun* only through the *ci* because the area is surrounded by rivers. In other words, one of the disadvantages of not owning a *ci* is that a *dusun* cannot be maintained and could easily be accessible to outsiders. Outsiders could easily benefit from a *dusun* that is not maintained by its owner. For example, an outsider can take the sago, wood, and everything in the *dusun* to be used personally or to sell. As a result, the owner of the *dusun* will lose his power and to benefit from his *dusun*.

Owning a *ci* will help people to minimize their expenses and avoid starvation. I could therefore say that an Asmat family would continuously live in harmony if they own a *ci* and paddles even if they have no money. However, they will face difficulties in their lives if they do not own a *ci*, even if they have much money.

Last, not owning *ci* triggers conflicts for an Asmat family or a community. For example, a wife can blame her husband continuously or even leaves him because he cannot provide a *ci* for their family. Paulinus (Fieldnote, p.47) said this truly happened, "*Setiap istri sangat senang ketika mendengar bahwa suaminya telah menebang pohon untuk dibuat perahu.*" (Every wife would be very happy to hear that her husband had cut down a tree to make a *ci*). This is good news for her because she would be able to find food for them and meet all the needs of the family without asking other people's help by borrowing their *ci*. If a household does not own a *ci*, the wife would go to the neighbor to borrow their *ci*, she would just follow others to find food for her family. Borrowing a *ci* continuously could lead to a quarrel, not only in the household but also with the neighbor. Therefore, this is an economic issue that may result to a social conflict in a community.

Moreover, a husband who cannot provide a *ci* for his family can be called *bitni* (knows nothing to work). A wife can leave a *bitni* husband and look for another man who can provide her with a *ci*. Therefore, making or providing a

ci is an important condition to determine the readiness of a man to marry a woman, even if it is not considered as a brideprice. In short, owning a *ci* will prevent conflicts among family members and among people in a community. If they own a *ci*, they can focus on their work and gain more benefits. Unfortunately, the *ci* now is being replaced by machinery boats, while the Asmats themselves do not put much concern to preserve it. As a result, they become powerless and less independent in many aspects of life.

Endnotes:

- ¹ *Dusun* is the ancestral domain of the Asmats. The Asmats call it *bokot* which means forest that is occupied by clans or families. It can be compared to *wasan* which is meant jungle. *Wasan* is occupied by nobody. Everybody is free to enter the *wasan*, but not the *bokot*. *Dusun* is an Indonesian word, meaning a village far from urban area, however, in the Asmat context, it is understood by both Asmats and non-Asmats as ancestral domain. That is why I prefer to use the word “*dusun*” than “*bokot*.”
- ² All names of the informants used are not the actual names.
- ³ *Jeu/je/jew/jae/yew* means men's longhouse; localized patri-oriented descent group; traditional house of Asmat.
- ⁴ Gunter Konrad in his article, “On the Phallic Symbol and Display in the Asmat” in *An Asmat Sketch Book No. 6*, reported: “The pole expresses a mythological image; it is simultaneously a monument to and record of the past. The *mbis* pole actualizes the spiritual and cultural elements of the *Mbis* people signifying the presence of the forefathers and confirming a conviction and determination for revenge. The *Mbis* is a remembrance of those once influential men (1978:90).
- ⁵ Power in this context simply means the ability to control, dominate, and use things such as the *dusun* (see Foucault 1980:102; Wartenberg 1990:5; Karlberg 2005:2).

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