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REVIEW ARTICLE

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THE PRESENTATION OF ART: A MUSEOLOGIST'S DILEMMA*

Simon Kooijman, *Art, Art Objects, and Ritual in the Mimika Culture*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984, Mededelingen van het Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, no. 24. 173 pp., 169 plates and figures, 1 map.

In European and American private and public collections of 'primitive' or Oceanic artifacts, specimens of the Asmat culture, in the southwestern coastal region of Irian Jaya, rate as spectacular. In this respect, the Asmat area is sometimes even referred to as the Sepik area of West Irian. It is probably less well known that the artistic achievements of the Mimika people match the accomplishments of their eastern Asmat neighbours. The two areas are linguistically and culturally related, and significantly different. This invites comparison. Unfortunately, in terms of completed and published research, the situation is uneven: ethno-aesthetic investigations, particularly by A. A. Gerbrands, both in the field and in museum collections, supported by outstanding films and various exhibitions, such as the current one at the Rotterdam Ethnographic Museum, highlight Asmat artistic skills. However, a monograph on Asmat culture is still sadly lacking, in spite of fieldwork by and the considerable store of knowledge accumulated in the heads, fieldnotes and scarce publications of Father Zegwaard m.s.c., Father Trenkenschuh o.s.c., the Dutch linguist C. Voorhoeve, and the American anthropologist David Eyde. Consequently, the ethno-aesthetic knowledge of Asmat art exists in a socio-cultural vacuum, which is apparent from films and exhibitions.

For Mimika the reverse obtains: there is a Mimika monograph, as well as a follow-up of various articles and papers written by the present reviewer. However, ethno-aesthetic fieldwork has not been carried out here. The publication of Kooijman's book, based on a painstaking analysis of collections in ethnographic museums at Leiden, Breda, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Cambridge and London, therefore, meets a distinct need. For information on the meaning, functions, and socio-cultural context of the objects, the author was dependent on invaluable typed reports and oral information provided by Zegwaard, on my own publications, on written information concerning objects collected by me, and on personal communications. Kooijman dearly wished to cooperate in a joint venture, in which I was invited to participate. Unfortun-

* I am grateful to Ms. M. van Yperen for her meticulous correction of the text of this article...

nately, teaching commitments prevented me from accepting the invitation. My doctoral thesis, which Kooijman omits to summarize, yet relies on extensively, deals with material equipment and food quests, with the social structure, land tenure, and the multifarious manifestations of the principle of reciprocity (*aopao*) in all spheres of life, and with history and its native interpretation. There are also separate reports on the social and ritual demarcation of death. A special publication on the multitude of Mimika rituals and their connections with myth, based on my extensive fieldnotes, remains yet to be written. So Kooijman was caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, as I am as a reviewer of his book. It would be unfair to confront Kooijman's fine study with data to which he had no access. On the other hand, Kooijman cannot or should not blame me for not providing information more specifically directed at the ethno-aesthetic aspects of Mimika culture. I did have an interest in Mimika art, I did collect objects of Mimika material culture for the Leiden and Amsterdam museums, and I did supply detailed information. However, I was fully aware of the ethical implications of collecting objects. So I operated cautiously, rather than committing myself to ruthless and systematic collection. My instructions as a government anthropologist were to conduct an intensive, systematic survey of Mimika culture, with some emphasis on social structure.

Kooijman begins with a discussion of the how and why of Mimika acquisitions by Dutch and British expeditions and officials. The earliest acquisitions, kept at the Leiden Museum, go back to 1828. It is clear from his review that an abundance of Mimika objects that may be considered as objects of art is available, and in a significant variety. Since the objects in question were discarded after their use in rituals, with new objects being continually produced for succeeding rituals, it is hardly surprising that, despite their ritual purpose, there are so many of them in museum collections (p. 161). A table indicating the numbers of objects in each category per collection would have been useful. As is so often the case, the number of acquisitions is disproportionate to the quantity and the quality of the available information, which is usually poor. Moreover, photographic material – let alone films – showing how the objects functioned in their context is scarce.

On the assumption that the artifacts functioned mainly in rituals, and that the connected articles of everyday use were derived from them and were of secondary importance, the author proceeds in Chapter I to discuss the former in their ceremonial context. These are:

- The spectacular spirit poles (*mbitoro*) which are the Mimika counterpart of Asmat poles (*bis*), their height being about 7 to 8 metres. They represent named female and male persons of note, including wood carvers, who have died recently. Kooijman's use of the term 'ancestors' in this connection is slightly misleading. These poles were erected in front

of ritual houses where boys acquired adult status through ritual nose-piercing, houses used for the pig festival, and ritual houses commemorating some male culture-hero's visit to the underworld, where he acquired the secrets of the Kaware ritual. The latter is *ideologically* associated with males, the coast, and the east. During the Kaware, canoes, paddles, sago bowls and masks were produced for both ritual and everyday use.

– Two-dimensional, free-standing female figures, lacking the *mbitoro* combination of a three-dimensional head with a 'hollow' trunk, whose height is about 2 to 3 metres. They depict pregnant women. These statues were erected in front of the Emakamè or (in eastern Mimika) Kiawa ritual house. The latter represents the ritualization of a myth according to which the human race (including the highlanders and the Indonesian, Chinese and European foreigners) was reborn from the bits and pieces of the body of a monster (a varan, crocodile or snake) which devoured the initial Mimika representatives of the human race: life from death. Emakamè or Kiawa is ideologically closely associated with the regenerative powers of women, with the inland and with the west. The seven spectacular female figures kept at the Leiden Museum are among the earliest Mimika materials (1913). All of them came from the far eastern part of Mimika (p. 27). Ideologically, Emakamè or Kiawa is related to Kaware as female is to male – a crucial categorization of Mimikan ritual, world view and social life. The remaining rituals may also be classified under these headings. It is regrettable that Kooijman hardly gives attention to this dominant Mimika classification, although information from Zegwaard, Father Coenen and myself pointing clearly in this direction was accessible to him. He tends to subsume the rituals under the general headings 'renewal of life' (p. 160) and 'life from death'.

These headings, while not incorrect, are insufficiently specific, particularly in view of other manifestations of dualism in various spheres of Mimika life.

Kooijman then discusses *animal figures*, i.e., two-dimensional representations of the cassowary and the Papuan hornbill (*komai*), in Mimika art. Young men ritually brought back to life from death in the ceremonial house representing a monster, leave the house while impersonating hornbills, carrying carved images of these on their heads. They are tugged at, chased and shot at by their sisters' husbands (Kooijman, p. 34, based on information from Zegwaard and myself).

Unfortunately Kooijman, who mentions the extensive report by the late Father Coenen on the spiritual aspects of Mimika culture (Coenen 1963), has overlooked the latter's lucid account of the story behind the *komai* ceremony (Coenen 1963:11-2). Some boys who have misbehaved towards older people evade punishment by hiding in a tree. They turn into handsome lads and arouse the desire and jealousy of a large group

of women who are unaccompanied by men (a motif from the Emakamè, the ceremonial of love and life). However, they deceive the women. After making love with them, they turn into hornbills and fly away. The ritual is intended to stop them: a most picturesque dramatization of love-making with youngsters reborn from death.

Next comes a description of the fascinating variety of handles and ornaments carved in *drums* which depict (parts of) the human body. Although drums are indispensable requisites of all feasts and dances, they are owned and used exclusively by men and are especially associated with the Kaware myths.

This is followed by a discussion of a large number of *yamate* or ornamented, shield-shaped, oblong objects with ceremonial functions, distinguishable into a 'closed', mainly symmetric type, and an 'open', generally asymmetric type. Kooijman makes the interesting suggestion that these shield-like objects, which have exclusively ceremonial functions, may have developed from the war shields that are common in the Asmat area (p. 72). The similarity in names (*yamate* = *yames*) is certainly striking. These ceremonial objects are closely associated with Emakamè and represent named male and female deceased. They often have anthropomorphic features or depict hornbills and cassowaries – animals which are likewise associated with Emakamè.

Kooijman then goes on to describe the paired ceremonial tablets with a *yamate* character (*urumanè, manè*, meaning 'two'). These were placed in the Emakamè ceremonial house (p. 76). According to Zegwaard, one of these two boards was placed horizontally in the doorway some distance above the ground; the older men had to step over and the younger men crawl under it (Kooijman, p. 76). The second board, in which the navel motif (*mòpere*) figured prominently (see photographs in Kooijman, p. 75), was, according to a description by the British observer Wollaston (1910-1911), tied horizontally between two poles at about half a man's height in the centre of the house (see Kooijman, p. 75). According to my information from Eastern Mimika (Pouwer, forthcoming), an elderly man would lie down on the board suspended between the two poles. He then called out the personal name of and the kinship term for his mother. His brother's child and sister's child would do likewise, and would also lie down on the board. Then another elderly man and his offspring would take the stage. I was told that also boys and young men climbed on top of the board, shouted their mother's name and then jumped down. The ceremony shows striking similarities with the ritual expression of grief over a person's death: here the husband or wife, children, and other close relatives lie down on the dead body. The *urumanè* ceremony seems to ritually demarcate the maternal or matrilineal social group descending from and named after a particular grandmother. Its members originate from her female parts which are depicted

on the board. The similarity of this with the carved pregnant women in front of the Kiawa house cannot be accidental. Kooijman seems to mix up the ceremonial boards (*urumanè*) belonging to the Emakamè or Kiawa complex with a pair of ceremonial boards (*nòkòrokao*) belonging to the Kaware complex (pp. 76-77). According to my own information, the two Kaware boards ornamented with elaborate carvings are comparable to, but not identical with, carvings on the Kiawa boards, and represent the two sides of a canoe. They are lashed together. A man – acting out *Kinakò*, the originator of carvings – stands in the middle of it during a ritual performed half-way through Kaware. According to the myth (collected by me in Umari, in western Mimika), *Kinako*, a widower living in Tipuka (eastern Mimika, a typical representative of the Kaware complex), was deceived by his two daughters, who kept the superior varieties of sago grubs themselves and offered their father the inferior ones. *Kinako* got angry. He secretly made a canoe of ironwood, and carved a *mbitoro* on its bows. He then scolded his daughters, left them, travelled underwater with the canoe – ironwood is heavier than water –, uprooting the trees and destroying the house belonging to his daughters with its sharp bow, followed the crocodiles and big fish, and departed for the underworld. He left behind a sample (*kao*) of the canoe and a *mamokòrò* mask. The ritual is intended as a reminder to women to keep to the rule of reciprocity. Large quantities of sago grubs are piled up by the women on both sides of the ceremonial canoe (*nòkòrò-kao*).

In the final section of Chapter I, on art in a ceremonial context, Kooijman briefly discusses the ornamented sago bowls produced by the men during the Kaware. This section further deals with two types of mask personifying the dead also during the Kaware, dancing-aprons, ceremonial headdresses, and armlets and nose ornaments.

Whereas Chapter I takes up about 100 pages, Chapter II, on art in daily life, significantly only covers roughly half this number. It deals with canoes, paddles, tools, utensils, weapons, clothing, and body ornaments. It includes a series of 47 outstanding photographs of finely decorated bamboo penis sheaths, which used to be worn in earlier days by initiated young, marriageable and married, men. The variety in the ornamentation is considerable. Kooijman's suggestions that these penis sheaths represent the covering (*kao*) of the as yet unborn ritual children who are to be transformed into adults (p. 144) seems to me far-fetched.

Kooijman mentions tattooing in the form of scarification, which is applied only to men, as a kind of body decoration. He suggests that it derives from Ceramese traders, from whom the Mimikans have also borrowed the indigenously styled neck rests and smith's bellows (p. 158). In the 1950's no trace of these cultural elements was left. However, the cutting of the teeth of young men and women in a zigzag shape did

survive (Pouwer 1955:256). Kooijman does not mention this type of body decoration, borrowed from Eastern Indonesian traders.

A motif *common* in decorative art both in a ceremonial context and in daily life is the oval, navel-like *mòpere* motif, also called *màpere* (= essence). It is the main symbol of life, and is applied to carvings depicting those parts of the body which are considered to be essential. It also symbolizes the ancestral mothers. The term *mòpere* occurs frequently in Kooijman's book; he is aware of its key significance. One should keep in mind that the Mimikans have a matrilineal tradition. Also, the genesis (and regeneration) of life is attributed to the acts of a snake-mother and her culture-hero son. The latter – or, in another version, the snake-mother herself, from whom the human race was reborn – killed the monster. Kooijman mentions this myth and its re-enactment in the Emakamè. However, there is more to the *màpere* or *mòpere* motif. *Màpere*, the essence of life, is transmitted to a developing foetus by the action of the penis during intercourse, by which the foetus is also believed to be modelled and generated. Moreover, the modelling of a foetus by its genitor is explicitly compared to the shaping of a *mbitoro* by the carver of these spirit poles in the course of the initiation of boys (Coenen 1963:54, 55; Father Zegwaard, personal communication). Regrettably, Kooijman has overlooked the striking analogy between carving and the conception of a child. This homology of 'la pensée concrète' confirms and specifies the relation between life and death already noted by Kooijman in a more general way.

The central matrifocal ideology of the transmission of *màpere* by men during sexual intercourse, in conjunction with the belief that Emakamè is related to Kaware as female is to male, could have functioned as an organizing principle for the discussion of Mimikan art in its context. As it is, Kooijman wavers between the etic and the emic approach, combining an inventory of objects listed according to some sort of museum classification with a discussion of the participants' interpretation of these objects derived from ethnographic sources.

In the summary and conclusion, Kooijman makes an interesting comparison between the Asmat and Mimika cultures as reflected in artifacts from those cultures. There are striking parallels in the form of the artifacts. However, as he points out (pp. 161-162), there is a difference in their function and meaning. In Asmat culture, war and head-hunting were dominant themes, with which the functions and meanings of many of the ornamented artifacts were closely connected. For instance, statues, spirit poles, and various other anthropomorphic carvings, and even the plain walls of the men's house, served as reminders to revenge the named dead; shields (*yames*) were attributes of war. In Mimika culture, there is no evidence of head-hunting. In fact, the Mimikans have named the Asmat after the said practices by calling them 'Wé-Mana-

wé', that is, 'people who eat people'. For the Mimikan people, shields (*yamate*) were, or later became, purely ceremonial objects. The themes of Mimikan culture as reflected in artifacts are: matrifocal life from death, commemoration of the dead, and re-enactment of the relations with the underworld, dominated by men. As for the social structure, Mimika is matrilineally oriented and has no separate houses for men, with the exception of the people of Otokwa, Inawka and Omawka in the far east. Asmat, however, is patrilineally oriented and has men's houses (*jö*).

The Emakamè or Kiawa ritual of Mimika has its counterpart in the Emake Cem feast in north Asmat (Voorhoeve s.a.:50), and the Mimikan Kaware in the Asmat sago grub feast, called *tow pokmbu* (Voorhoeve s.a.:47). Voorhoeve makes it clear that the myth of the Mimikan culture-hero Mamirima, who is credited with the Kaware secrets and rituals, closely parallels episodes from the myth about the Asmat culture-hero Fumbiripic, said to be the owner of the sago grub feast (p. 47). However, the representation of Fumbiripic as the creator of all Asmat is an error resulting from a faulty translation of a passage from Zegwaard's original. The myth explicitly states that Fumbiripic is not the creator of the Asmat but of the people *outside* Asmat territory. They are 'the people of wood', the statues drummed into life to serve as husbands for sexually starved bird women (Voorhoeve s.a.:54). The Asmat, however, are the 'real people'. In all versions of the myth, the emphasis is on the people living to the west of the Asmat; probably to explain their cultural affinity with the Asmat people, as well as the provenance of the much desired western goods, which came to the Asmat via Mimika (Voorhoeve s.a.:55). In the light of this evidence, Kooijman's interpretation of Mamirima and Kaware as a generator of human life (p. 51), on the basis of Gerbrands' and Zegwaard's faulty interpretation of Fumbiripic (Gerbrands 1967:33-34; Zegwaard, personal communication), must be rejected. It is the culture-hero of Emakamè, or Emaka Cem, who should be credited with the genesis or regeneration of the Mimika and the Asmat people respectively according to their own views.

It is only fair to admit that Kooijman's object-oriented presentation of Mimika art, although it tends to distort the cultural context of the artifacts, also has its advantages: it enables the reader to compare the morphological and aesthetic features of the objects concerned. The more so, since Kooijman's study is lavishly illustrated with photographs of an outstanding quality. The English translation of the Dutch text by Inez Seeger tends to follow the Dutch idiom too closely, and is stiff and unnatural. Expressions like 'tidewater forest' (XII) instead of 'tidal forest', and 'Papuas' instead of 'Papuan', sound unusual and clumsy. Moreover, the translation of *onderafdeling* with 'sub-department' (XI) is incorrect, as this word denotes a district.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of the book, Kooijman and his translator have done the international community of Oceanic specialists an outstanding service by making available to this audience some unique data which would otherwise have remained inaccessible, stored away in the vaults of museums and phrased in an obscure language.

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