

Barynia Vleeming
October 2003
American English
1490 words

How are (were) art and myth interconnected in Ilahita Arapesh culture

Art has always played a major role in the history of man. Cave paintings are often all we have left of the cultures that lived long before us. Art remains, and it also tells us something about the people that created it. How they were living and what was important to them. Often the religion they practiced or the myths they believed in were displayed in their works of art. Art and myth are interconnected. Art and myth play major roles in many societies to this day. In New Guinea, among the Ilahita Arapesh, art and myth are present in every day culture. Art is connected with the origins of life, with the special bond between man and nature and with the most significant transitions in life. The Ilahita Arapesh use art as a manifestation of their beliefs. I will now try to explain the relationship between art and myth amongst the Ilahita Arapesh while the Tambaran cult is still alive.

What is art exactly and when is something considered art? The dictionary defines art as; *“the quality, production, expression or realm of what is beautiful or of more than ordinary significance; the class of objects subject to aesthetic criteria.”* In order to understand this definition we need to understand the concept of aesthetics. Aesthetics is defined by Kottak (2002:340) as; *“The Appreciation of the qualities perceived in works of art; the mind and emotions in relation to a sense of beauty .”* In other words, art is something that moves us, on any level. In Western society art is now acknowledged as a true profession and art has become autonomous. Art exists by itself and it is admired in that way. In Non – Western society, like in the society of the Ilahita Arapesh, art is not something that exists by itself, it exists because of myth and religious ideas. A myth may be defined as: *“A myth is a statement about society and man’s place in it and the surrounding universe (Middleton 1967).* Myths try to define who we are and often also where we come from. It is therefore not strange that the Ilahita Arapesh see such importance in myths. As formerly stated, almost everything

amongst the Ilahita Arapesh revolves around myths. The Ilahita Arapesh can see a relationship between art and myth everywhere. A yam has a spirit for instance, and everything is considered magical and a manifestation of religious ideas. The relationship with the supernatural is expressed through art. The Tambaran therefore formed such an important structure in the culture of the Ilahita Arapesh.

A good example showing how exactly myth and art are related is that of *Olafen* (reader p.168-169). The myth is about a pregnant woman. In this story, pregnant women had to have their bellies cut open in order to deliver a baby because people simply hadn't found another way to do it yet. In this process, the mother was killed. But one day, a woman is about to give birth and a spirit in the house post tells her that she can deliver the baby in another way. This revelation is of course very useful for the rest of the tribe members. After the myth has been told however, the storyteller adds that the spirit in the housepost was actually the husbands spirit for he had carved it. This last note illustrates how close art and myth are related, for the mans spirit in fact merges with his work of art, thereby becoming one and the same thing.

When the men are initiated into the Tambaran, they have to create works of art, paintings representing nggwals. In this process the artists spirit is incorporated into the painting as Tuzin (1980) here so clearly states: "*Arapesh art is imputed to be the materialization of the artist's own spirit*" (Reader, p.177) and he furtherly suggests that the painting and the artist have the same identity: " ..., *the mystic relationship between man and Nggwal goes beyond mutual dependency and arrives at the deeper symbolic level of mutual identity*".(Tuzin 1980: 178). Art becomes then the material evidence that myth exists, it is the exact manifestation of myth and religious ideas that lie in the spirits of these different men. Myth is art and art is myth just as the spirit of the artist is the piece of art and vice versa. To illustrate these ideas more clearly, there is a myth that illustrates this. This is the myth of the cassowary bird or Nambweapa'w. This myth is so important especially because it is so manifested in the way that people behave and thus also in art. The story of Nambweapa'w holds a very unique place in Ilahita Arapesh society: "*All in one, it exhibits their sense of themselves as human beings, moral actors, residents of an illustrious village, and custodians of a shrine of universal importance; all in one, it projects their fondest wishes and fondest dreads.*"(Tuzin: 1997:7 1)

The story of Nambweapa'w is the story of a cassowary bird that goes and bathes with other cassowaries. They take of their skins to do so. The First Man sees this and takes

the skin from one of the cassowaries. They then become husband and wife and have children. The youngest son, however, tells his mom where she can find her skin back. She takes her skin back and kills her husband. Her children, all of alternating genders, are bitten by insects that give them each a different language. Her children represent the different cultures that are existent upon this earth. The cassowary mother takes away her magic and power because her children, except for her youngest son, do not appreciate the Edenic life she has given them. The youngest son leaves to a far country and when he comes back he will bring paradise with him.

The art that is created all revolves around this myth. The cassowary bird is the supermother, the ancestor of them all. This is manifested in the Nggwall paintings that are created by the novices. As stated by Tuzin (1980): *“The sex of the figure is somewhat ambiguous: the black triangle on the lower abdomen implies femininity,…”*(Reader p. 176). This relates back to the fact that the cassowary mother initially did not have a sex and her husband created her a vagina. The shell necklaces involved in the painting also relate back to the cassowary bird because in the tale her necklace is stolen to get her to her husband. The tribal houses in which all the art is displayed constitute of different figures, on top there are the nggwals and in the middle you have the cassowary bird with her children that are of alternating sexes. The fact that the cassowary mother is in the middle indicates her importance to the culture: everything revolves around her. As stated by Tuzin(1980): *“Nambweapa’w provides the key to the symbolism of the façade as a whole”*. (Reader p.181). Art shows us what the tale of Nambweapa’w has done to the culture. The importance of the youngest son is manifested through art just as the balance that has to be created between male and female. Women are in fact considered more powerful. The cassowary mother’s is stolen, and therefore her magic and femininity is stolen. Once the youngest son returns and reunites all the cassowary birds’ children, that magic femininity and power will also return amongst the Arapesh. Women are considered more powerful amongst the Ilahita Arapesh and this is also represented in the art of the Tambaran, since there is always a balance present between male and female. The tribal houses include a female foot (Nambweapa’w) and a male foot. The feminine is greatly honored because it is considered the magic that has created everything. One of the statues/ totems that clearly illustrates this is one of the nggwal and the pig. As said by Tuzin (1980:182): *“The interposition of Nggwall between mother and child as the ultimate nurturant source, the implied equation of semen and breast milk which*

arrogated to the masculine principle functions and prepotencies naturally associated with femininity.”. The feminine and the masculine always have to be kept in a balance.

Arapesh art and Arapesh myth are in fact not two separate entities, the one exists because the other exists and they keep each other alive. The Arapesh Ilahita are very spiritual people, always trying to remain in contact with the supernatural. Their myths are exercised through their every day lives and their works of art. Their works of art convey the message of their belief in the supernatural and mythical. Art and spirit are one and the same thing; just as art and myth are thus mutual identities. It has to be noted that I have written this essay on the grounds that The Tambaran cult hasn't fallen yet. When the Tambaran cult does fall, art and myth relate slightly differently, because of the crisis of masculinity involved.

Bibliography

1. Tuzin, Donald F. (1997). **“The Cassowary’s Revenge”**. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
2. Kottak, Philip Conrad (2002). **“Anthropology: The exploration of human diversity”**. Mc Graw Hill, New York.
3. Tuzin, Donald F. (1980) **“The voice of the Tambaran: Truth and illusion in Ilahita Arapesh Religion.”** University of California press.