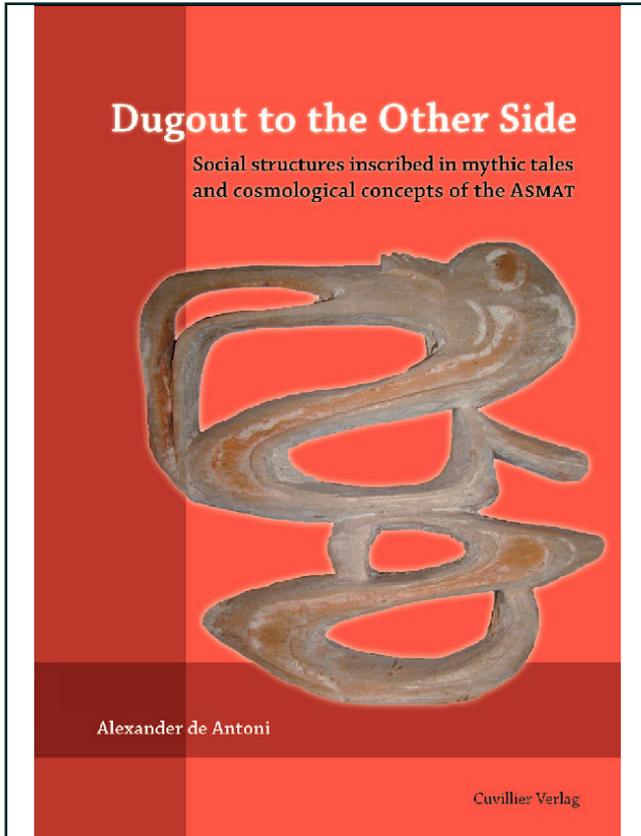




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Dugout to the Other Side

Social structures inscribed in mythic tales and cosmological concepts of the Asmat



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Introduction and acknowledgements

Just a few more steps on a hard stamped sand-floor in the shade of high palm-trees and once more I stood on the bank of the Fayit-river, a place I was drawn to again and again in the intervals of my work. On this late afternoon the sun had let the cloud cover, that normally lay over the land during daytime, vanish. The river-landscape and the nearby riverbank-settlement were lying in clearness dipped into light developing deep colours in front of me. I just wanted to watch the canoes passing leisurely by, which returned before nightfall. From far off I saw one entering the bend upriver from my lodging. It must have been an extremely large and fully loaded one. I counted twelve men standing with their oars pointing far over their heads and fourteen women and children, sitting in the boat at the men's feet. As they were passing the bend, I couldn't see enough of the slow absolutely regular rhythm, with which all of them pulled the oars out of the water, transplanted them forwards and dipped them into the water again in order to press them back. Drops of water, which dripped off the blades every time they were lifted, helped me notice the rhythm acoustically with which the canoe silently glided past my spot on the river-bank.

Relaxed I observed the canoe on its continuing trip entering a small side-river a little further downstream. It could possibly have happened that it landed on the bank, to give the passengers the possibility to wade through the mud and then climb up to the dry riverbank. But it disappeared out of my view. This picture anchored in my memory. After disappearing out of my view the canoe kept on continuing its journey to somewhere.

It was this impression that made the boat recognizable as means of transportation, which enables social contacts over lengths of a river, but also creates relations beyond the river area. This attribute doesn't only concern limited distances in our part of the world. Canoes, carved to provide the ancestors with means of transportation, surmount the distances between the life-spheres we live in and the ones that serve as home for the

ancestors. The deceased need a connection to their realm. But they should just as well have the chance to return – at least for a time – into our sphere of life.

The conveyance necessary for vital transports within the fields of the world, which also provides connections to totally different life-spheres, is represented for the Asmat by the canoe. It enables the overcoming of border-areas but it also prevents the formation of such borders.

Here in the natural environment of the Asmat the lack of borders is substituted with flowing transitions. This is going to be described in detail. Beyond the discussion this phenomenon will be seen as one of the basic arguments for a thesis which this paper deals with. Here lack of boundaries is not only a characteristic feature of the natural environment but also of a great deal of parts of the social order of the Asmat. This order stands for the sum of regulations and conventions which determine all activities of social living together. Therefore the order determines the way members of an ethnic group deal with one another but also with outsiders not belonging to the own group.

By mentioning the surrounding natural environment one of the sources, this work is based on, is pointed to. Also the conclusion, which will be drawn out of these sources, has been outlined. The definition of the research question, which will accompany me through this paper, just as of the specific sources, which will be quoted to answer it, are still due.

The social order manifests itself in habits which humans practise in their community life. That occurs in various fields of social life in which individuals or groups belonging to the ethnic group move. Such fields can possibly consist of groups or subgroups, in which the specific human community subdivides according to its own understanding. Accordingly the social order can become effective in fields of activity of individuals or of humans acting with one another for a time being. In such fields from the habitus pre-modelled forms of practical acting are developed. Those are characteristic forms of acting of the ethnic group. The roots and the origin of such forms of habitus, as they represented an essential question in the researches of Bourdieu, do not concern me here. I would prefer to scrutinize its position within processes of mediating of patterns and structures closely. The habitus is as Bourdieu understood it a connecting link between patterns and structures and the practical behaviour of humans. The habitus is the structure incorporated in a human behaviour (Zips 2001: 221-222).

In consequence the behaviour - the human practice - represents a possibility to achieve a view on structures and patterns such a behaviour is based on. I shall try to discover criteria for the selection of elements of structures and patterns in practised behavioural forms. It can be assumed that there exists a variety of possibilities able of conditioning such structures and patterns. Following which criterions may the

specific configuration of a social structure, of a basic pattern be categorized? This is also the main question of this paper. How can a structural pattern belonging to the cultural memory of an ethnic group be described and defined? It produces specific configurations of the habitus practised in a social group, an ethnic community of humans living and acting with one another.

The specific configurations of such patterns are the ones I am interested in, but not their long-term origin. That's why I do not intend to deal with a diachronic study on the habitus, but maximal with micro-diachronic changes connected to the choice of one or the other articulation of habitus.

So the sources I propose to make use of for the answering of the research question are focused on. Myths will take up wide area among these. That is connected to the fact that myths are equipped with a basic position in the process of the selection and especially of the passing on of forms of expression of the habitus. I propose to illustrate exemplarily how these patterns and structures are articulated in myths. They provide a possibility to illustrate something abstract and therefore to make it able to communicate to the own ethnic group.

Following the example of the ethnic group of the Asmat in Papua and its culture, I intend to show how different fields of social life and culture are interwoven with one another. I want to explain how mechanisms can be read out of such a network, mechanisms which cause the concrete forming of certain practices and ideas in an ethnic group. My field of research is therefore the cognitive region of the human which in its interwoven connections is responsible for the development of concrete forms of social life. What I definitively do not intend is to add an exotic touch to the culture of the Asmat and treat it as a special case even though my focus is nearly exclusively fixed on this culture. On the contrary I assume that because of a number of reasons I intend to explain, the cultural ideas of this ethnic group are able to throw light on processes which are due to a universal character.

Theoretically I intend to refer to knowledge that concerns something like a cultural memory. Its development, transformations and its imparting will be discussed first of all. A focal point is represented for me in the process of the development of ideas of this memory in social practices. The theories of Aleida Assmann concerning a cultural knowledge and a collective memory will form a foundation to introduce a new theoretical concept.

Concerning a further focal point of this work, that is the one of the sources for the theory that will be elaborated, I intend to present an overall view over the ethnography of the Asmat. There exist only few anthropological researches carried out over a longer period of time in the Asmat region. So it is not so difficult to include them

and by doing so to mark out the state of research. So the cosmologic world view and ritual practices will be described in their social context (see the sections belonging to the chapter 3.3). Concerning the documentation and analysis of the specific culture of the Asmat I propose to mainly refer to one database. Detailed investigations and documentations were collected in the years 1970 - 1981 and published in a series of stapled pamphlets under the title 'An Asmat Sketch Book'. The booklets are available at the following address: American Museum of Asmat Art at the University of St. Thomas, Mail 57p, 2115 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105, USA.

Since a mythic narration is a major source in the argumentation I propose to focus on the mythic research on the Asmat. The importance of myths in the construction of the social system of the Asmat should be lighted up. The myth dealt with here is going to be interpreted with the help of the method of structural analysis we thank Lévi-Strauss¹ (see the sections belonging to the chapter 3.2.3). By this an essential theoretical and methodological concept is mentioned, that will be the basis for this work.

On one hand I owe the material that was at my disposal for this work and that helped me find my theoretical point of view to several field trips lasting a few weeks every time in the region of research. On the other hand I could fall back on research material that had already been published. How I came to the mythic material and subsequently to translations of these sources I have already pointed out in my master's thesis (de Antoni 2007a). It will find its continuation here. Especially in working on translations I could gain experiences since the work documented in Papua. These will be described here in detail (see sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 inclusive the subsections belonging to them). In the following the translated texts could undergo text analytic methods. Besides quantitative methods it was the method of the structural analysis which enabled the bringing of basics for an interpretation of songs to daylight. Also the contents of the songs were screened with comparative contents-analytical methods.

In addition to myths, examples of manifestations of the habitus belonging to the wide range of fields of social life should be described. Apart from the social fields,

¹ It was the merit of Lévi-Strauss to make use of linguistic ideas in anthropology. The idea of Ferdinand de Saussures of the value of a linguistic sign that derives from its opposition to other signs, was a starting point for Lévi-Strauss for the development of methods, which illustrate models of structures of social practices (Barnes 2001: 15223). Lévi-Strauss tried to develop methods, which enable the production of models of the social reality (Heydebrand 2001: 15232). He assumed that humans think in classifications. He especially located such in binary pairs of opposition. They are projected into the world and that way form perception. That is also a way to explain myths. He discovers their meaning in their structure and analyses it independently of their social context (Segal 2001: 10275). Sahlins also assumes that – for instance in the Hawaiian culture – sources for the construction of a scheme of social life can be found in myths. He calls it a reproduction-structure. It contains relationships between a king and his people, god and human, man and wife, foreigners and locals, war and peace, heaven and earth. The political appears to be an aspect of the cosmological (Sahlins: 1992:85-86).

features of the landscape, which are possibly located in a relation to structures of the social order, will be described, as already mentioned. In that way indications capable of explaining how far geographic facts of the natural environment humans live in, are capable of influencing social habits by means of the structure pattern, will be collected.

Because of the lack of a description and a definition of the complete sum of such social fields, this work is limited to the discussion of unsystematically selected examples from different social fields. Besides, criteria for a valuation of different fields of an ethnic group are missing. The discussed fields are added one after the other. A comparable relationship of meaning of one example to the other has to remain outstanding.

Considering the importance, which the reflection of the factor change of social practice and representations plays in contemporary culture and social anthropology, this subject field shouldn't stay unnoticed. This although the work presented here is dedicated to cultural factors establishing constancy and preservation of identity. Cultural phenomena are subject to a constant change and in this process both factors have a constitutive function. How far they complement one another and are situated in a synthetic relationship (Sahlins 1992: 150) is to be discussed (see section 2.3).

Some of the theoretical argumentation and also the necessary definition of terms I shall deal with in the footnotes. I have decided on this formal arrangement in order not to interrupt the fluent train of thought with longer discussions. Nevertheless I don't want to omit to add some clearing up which can prevent misunderstandings.

I would like to thank three professors of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Vienna for their accompanying my reflections. In alphabetic order I want to express my thanks to begin with to Manfred Kremser. His enthusiasm, his encouraging impulses and clear preconditions for the formulation of aspects of the research have helped me to include fields into my point of view of my consideration, which would have stayed unexposed without his engagement. Elke Mader has also accompanied my work with interest. She has helped to reveal essential sources and to formulate ideas more precisely with her valuable comments. Last but not least I would like to thank Hermann Mückler especially for the generous confidence he gave me by giving me the possibility to present my ideas to an interested public. Looking back, the lecture was a massive challenge for me that gave me a chance to put my ideas into a logical order by formulating them.

Concerning the translation work from the Indonesian I owe thanks to Josef Haas and Very Korsin besides a number of assistants during my field research in Asmat for the translation of several texts and interviews. I would like to give my mother a

big thank you for the hours actually days she spent correcting and translating. I am also grateful to David and Patricia McErlean. They invested a lot of time and care correcting the English of this book.

First of all audiocassettes recorded 1984 containing mythic texts performed in songs accompanied by drumming had to be translated. They are at my disposal as a basic source for the working out of the theory of this work. I collected further clues and data to this myth within the scope of a field research 2007 in Asmat. They will be recorded and discussed here. Beforehand I would like to express my thanks to all who have supported me with the achievement and the translation of interviews and texts. In this connection I specially want to mention Bavo Felndity just as Mateus from Waras, Lukas Bayua from Biopis and Yukem Amaita from Nanai.

It is the canoe that as I see it could be something of a symbol for the Asmat. It represents the view of life that accompanies the people living in this alluvial swampland through their life. It symbolises among other things the overcoming or the annulment of border areas, which would reduce people's possibilities for development. The canoe doesn't only overcome separating distances in everyday life, but also enables connections to other spheres of our world.

The creation of this symbol is not thinkable without a sense of boundlessness in the thinking and feeling of people. Imaginations of the linked nearness to different spheres of our world have to be present in their minds. Mental conditions precede the occupation of objects, acts, relationships or terms – according to Gagliardi they can become symbolic objects (Gagliardi 2001: 10279) – with meanings² and therefore condition the origin of symbols. In the process of the development of social systems a functional position is due to these mental conditions. That's what I want to deal with here first. The establishing of a symbolic meaning that is due to the canoe of the Asmat - it connects, makes social relationships possible and crosses borderlines - is the subject I dedicate this work to. First of all the theoretical theme and the position of research will be described. In the sequel the sources which are quoted as theoretical arguments and proofs will be dealt with.

² The term 'meaning', used in an anthropological context, is equipped with specific connotations. These result from the relationship to the social community, in which it is planted. Sahlins describes such a structuring of meaning as a historic process. He expresses it in new valuations that become standard by historic practical acting. He is engaged with the culture specific point of view of history as a coining factor of meaning. The other way round - there are cultural schemes of meaning that are structured by history (Sahlins 1992: 7). Meaning is thus not the one that individuals attribute in their individual point of view, but a generally accepted and assumed one (Sahlins 1992: 10).