



Meeting the Asmat

An American family in West Papua

By Michelle L Smith

The tribe greeting the family

On New Year's Day 2011, our family of seven set out to meet the Asmat tribe who live in Awus Village, in West Papua (formerly Irian Jaya), Indonesia.

The Asmat region is a jungle-covered mangrove swamp. There are no roads and very few airstrips, which leaves the traveller with the burden of accessing the Asmat villages by boat, specifically by dugout canoe since this is the only type of boat that can navigate the shallow and narrow rivers of the region. The capital city of Agats was the only place our 100-foot sailboat could successfully anchor close to the shore owing to vast areas of sand flats just under the surface of the water.

Agats was settled in 1953 by the Dutch colonial government and was the seat of Roman Catholic missionaries. Today it is home to 6,000 people who have mostly come to Agats from other areas of Indonesia to set up small businesses. The entire city is raised above the mangrove swamp and tidal rivers by walkways, held up by pilings. Small bridges lead from the main walkways (streets) to each house, school, or place of worship. Villagers ride bicycles and motorbikes on the same narrow walkways that pedestrians use. If you fall off the

labyrinth of walkways, you'll tumble into the swamp waters or sand, depending on the tide.

One of the most interesting sites in Agats is the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress, which the Catholic Church established in 1973. The Asmat are considered to be some of the best wood carvers in Southeast Asia. Significant portions of the museum's contents are woodcarvings that highlight every aspect of Asmat life and culture. The carvings depict collecting sago palm for sustenance in the forest, headhunting and building houses. There are examples of drums, shields, bows, arrows, jewellery, forest animals and skulls. A 30-foot carving of a crocodile had pride of place in the main hall. A 20-foot carving of a python in the process of devouring a warrior sat next to it; the warrior's head and shoulders had not yet been entirely consumed by the snake. The carving depicts two other warriors working quickly to prevent the snake from digesting their tribesman. One ties a rope around the snake's neck to prevent the human meal from being totally consumed. The other warrior pounds wooden stakes into the snake at several points in an attempt to kill it, or at least



The 20-foot-long carving of a python in the process of devouring a warrior



The Smith family with the Asmat



Warrior with drum he made, cassowary dagger and feathered headpiece

injure it enough so its muscles relax sufficiently to save their fellow warrior from an unfortunate fate. After seeing these depictions of Asmat life, as we navigated our dugout canoe upstream along the Bow River away from Agats, I fully understood what lurked in the mangrove forest that surrounded us.

The tribe was expecting us. Our guide had travelled to Awus four months earlier to obtain permission from the chief and other tribal elders for our group to visit. Awus has a population of about 300 inhabitants. Every single one of them came out to greet us. The men and boys were covered in war-paint, wore feathers or possum fur on their heads, grass skirts around their waists, nose rings, and had daggers made of sharpened cassowary femurs tied around their triceps. They chanted rhythmically as they stood in their canoes propelling themselves with long bamboo poles. They were completely in rhythm, both with the chanting and with each thrust of the bamboo pole in the water. Each boat held four or five men. About 25 canoes approached us from the front and about 25 from behind. They circled around us for a long time, then at some point it was decided that we would be invited to go ashore.

When we arrived on shore, a ceremony designed to scare away all the evil spirits that we had brought with us took place. A fence made of yellow palm strips surrounded the



The village women and children coming to greet the family

village. All of the women stood within the village perimeter holding whips made from strips of palm. Only the village matriarch stood outside the perimeter, leading the chanting. While nobody whipped us, the men took quite a beating before we were allowed to enter.

Under normal circumstances, it is taboo for women to enter the men's house. However, since we had brought gifts of tobacco and betel, and we were foreigners, the ban on women was temporarily lifted. It was our good fortune that our visit coincided with New Year's Day. All the village children had the day off from school. The boys performed ritual dances and chanted for us. In exchange, my children (ages 5–15 years) showed them pictures of themselves from a digital camera. For the Asmat, the highlight of our visit was our five-year-old daughter, whom we had brought along. While the villagers have interacted with western adults, mostly missionaries, they had never before seen a young Caucasian girl with long blonde curls.

Awus is very isolated. From Awus, travelling to Agats takes two hours in a dugout canoe with a motor, but it can take a whole day without one. The village possesses only two motors. Electricity had not yet arrived here, so most of the villagers have never seen a television or computer and know nothing of the internet.

Missionaries have converted the villagers to Christianity, but the form of Christianity practised is very much interwoven with their traditional animistic practices. I desperately wanted to see the cult house that most likely contains the village collection of skulls, but my guide explained to me that even if they exist, he really could not show them to me. I was told that Indonesian government regulations pertaining to some historical cultural practices, prohibit certain items being displayed.

Our visit to Awus ended abruptly when our boatman announced that the water in the Bow River was receding very quickly and we must depart immediately or stay until the tide rose again. We chose to depart!

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All photos by the author