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Apotropaic 'jeru' of the Yafi, West New Guinea

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Context: The vast island of New Guinea is one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse areas of the world. Located in an highland valley in the center of the island and between two major mountain ranges, the Yafi area at the headwaters of the Keerom River is so little-documented that accurate maps are difficult to come by, even today. However, this area is home to rich cultural and artistic traditions that have received little attention due to the region's small population and geographic obscurity.

The Apotropaic *Jeru* of the Yafi Western New Guinea

By Raymond Corbey

The exploits of the Dutch collector and independent scholar Jac Hoogerbrugge (1923–2013) in New Guinea and Indonesia border on the legendary. Jac wanted the many treasures he had acquired to find their way to other aficionados after his demise, and “not to some dusty museum depot,” as he used to say. And so they did, not in the least through the annual *Parcours des Mondes* art fair in Paris, although many of his pieces had already reached major museums worldwide during his lifetime.

Less well known than his art collection is Hoogerbrugge’s extensive private archive, the result of several decades of gathering documents and photographs relating to the history and ritual arts of western New Guinea, and particularly to items in his private collection (fig. 4).¹ In the process, he was able to gather a great deal of information from his contacts with residents and former residents of the Netherlands New Guinea, particularly missionaries, administrators, and their heirs. His publications on, among other groups, the Asmat and the inhabitants of Lake Sentani have become major references.²

This article breaks new ground by connecting archival materials assembled by Hoogerbrugge with a group of apotropaic (i.e., evil- or sickness-averting) shield-shaped objects, or *jeru*, in his collection from the Yafi (aka Jafi) area in the Keerom River headwaters of what was Dutch New Guinea (fig. 1).





FIG. 1: The Yafi area at the headwaters of the Keerom River, Papua province, Indonesian New Guinea, close to the boundary with Papua New Guinea to the east.

Cartography: Patty Wu.

This area remains little documented. The geography of this map is compiled from modern satellite imagery, with some of the river names and settlements based on hand-drawn colonial-period maps, which only partially correspond to the physical geography of the region. The most complete of these early documents shows nearly forty settlements in the Yafi area, but the present map highlights the largest ones and those mentioned in this article.

FIGS. 2a & b: Double-sided jeru with zoomorphic image.

Yafi area, Keerom River headwaters, Papua province, Indonesian New Guinea.

Tree bark, pigment, fiber. H: 63 cm.

Acquired by Jac Hoogerbrugge from Father Placidus Frankenmolen in Hollandia (present-day Jayapura), 1956.

Private collection.

Photos: Eric van den Bandt.



FIGS. 3a and b: Double-sided *jeru* with geometric symbols.
Yafi area, Keerom River headwaters, Papua province, Indonesian New Guinea.
Tree bark, pigment, fiber. H: 62 cm.
Acquired by Jac Hoogerbrugge from Father Placidus Frankenmolen in Hollandia (present-day Jayapura), 1956.
Private collection.
Photos: Eric van den Bandt.

Jac Hoogerbrugge (1923–2013) was a Netherlands-based collector and independent scholar who focused on the many cultures of New Guinea and Indonesia. In addition to his art collection, which has now largely been dispersed to an array of museums and private collections. He also formed an extensive and unique archive documenting these cultures. This remains a singular resource to this day, and one for which he should be remembered.

Jeru are usually diamond-shaped and each consists of two painted pieces of either tree bark or sago spathe or spine stitched together back to back. The resulting double panels generally measure around 70 x 30 cm.

Hoogerbrugge acquired his examples of *jeru* (figs. 2, 3, 5, and 14) in 1956 from a Roman Catholic missionary in Hollandia (known as Jayapura since 1962), the port and government post in the northeast of Dutch New Guinea.³ Hoogerbrugge was stationed there as a shipping agent on behalf of the Dutch Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (Royal Packet Navigation Company). The missionary in question was Placidus (Hans) Frankenmolen, OFM (1926–2003), one of the Dutch Minorites (Franciscans) who had then just begun proselytising in the Yafi area.

THE YAFI AREA

The Yafi area is about 90 km due south of two regions well known for their ritual art: Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay (Teluk Yos Sudarso). It is also not far from the Baliem Valley to the west and the border with Papua New Guinea and the Sepik headwaters to the east. This sparsely populated area measures around 70 km east-west and 30 km north-south. During the 1950s, it was comprised of some forty villages and approximately 2,000 horticulturalists-cum-foragers, speaking thirteen different languages or dialects. Presently, the Yafi area is part of the Indonesian Keerom Regency, which is named after the Keerom River.

Given the low population numbers, early Yafi *jeru* are rare. During the preparation of this article, only about twenty additional examples of similar size and iconography were identified, the majority of which are kept in the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (aka Wereldmuseum) in the Netherlands (fig. 15).⁴

Until around 1950, hunters of birds of paradise, military personnel, traveling Dutch colonial officials, and the like visited the area only occasionally. About this time, a small government outpost was set up there and both American Protestant missionaries and Dutch Roman Catholic missionaries established mission posts and schools.

"Only horrible stories about these people had seeped into

the mind of the European by regions already under Dutch rule," wrote Audifax Blokdijk,



FIG. 4: Jac Hoogerbrugge, 2014.
Photo: Roswitha Manning.

FIG. 5: Single panel from a *jeru* with geometric symbols.
Yafi area, Keerom River headwaters, Papua province, Indonesian New Guinea.
Tree bark, pigment, fiber.
H: 80 cm.
Acquired by Jac Hoogerbrugge from Father Placidus Frankenmolen in Hollandia (present-day Jayapura), 1956.
Private collection.
Photos: Eric van den Bandt.



◀ **FIG. 6:** Costumed male dancers with *jeru* in preparation for a ritual intended to ward off sickness spirits, Yafi area, 1956.

Photo: Father Placidus Frankenmolen, OFM.
J. Hoogerbrugge Archive.

▲ **FIG. 7:** In preparation for a Yafi area funerary ceremony, two indigenous ritualists (*gègèr*) paint their faces black using ashes mixed with pig fat, prior to painting the corpse black, Yafi area, 1956.

Photo: Father Placidus Frankenmolen, OFM.
J. Hoogerbrugge Archive.

► **FIGS. 8a and b:** After a ritual has ended, the *jeru* are hung from the back of a house, where they protect against spirits intending harm. Ubrud Village, Yafi area, 1960.

Photo: Father Placidus Frankenmolen, OFM.
J. Hoogerbrugge Archive.

OFM, the first Roman-Catholic missionary in the area, in 1953. ‘They are hot-headed, rough, raw, they will stop at nothing. ‘The fact that I am still here can be called a miracle,’ I noted in my diary three weeks after my arrival. They are unmanageable unless you endear them to some degree by being cordial and generous.’⁵

Relevant Sources

A number of both published and unpublished texts by several Minorite missionaries who worked in the area offer bits and pieces of information on the meaning and use of *jeru*, as do a series of typewritten reports on tours of duty created during the 1950s by colonial administrators. These are now kept in the National Archives of The Netherlands in The Hague.

A third relevant source is an ethnological survey of the Yafi area conducted in 1956 by the Dutch ‘government ethnologist’ Dr. Klaas W. Galis (1910–1999), which was commissioned by the

Dutch administration. He decided to focus on Yafi village, after which the wider Yafi area was named, home to some 200 souls spread over three hamlets built along shore of the Poe River, a left-bank tributary of the Keerom River (aka Pai River). Following only three weeks of intensive field research, in July of 1956 Galis produced a dense and detailed eighty-five-page typescript on these people.⁶ Apart from covering basic statistics on demography, health, and acculturation, it serves as a concise ethnography offering considerable detail on kinship and ritual.

The amount and quality of the information this gifted and experienced ethnographer managed to compile in just three weeks is staggering. His text includes information about horticulture, hunting, marriage arrangements, trade, warfare, initiation ceremonies, elaborate funerals, the spirit world, totemism, lethal magic, the various roles of the *gègèr* (ritualists), and—relevant here—apotropaic *jeru*. Sangrar, a peripatetic primaeval culture





◀ **FIG. 9:** A commemorative ritual with *jeru* in progress, Ubrud Village in the Yafi area, 1960s. Photographer unknown. J. Hoogerbrugge archive.

▲ **FIG. 10:** Father Frankemolen getting ready to take part in a commemorative ceremony for a recently deceased man in Amgotro Village, September 1961. After this ritual, the village was burned down and a new one was constructed nearby. Still from 16-mm footage by James S. Bruce. Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. KOP20760.99.1494-0.

hero of the trickster kind, takes pride of place in the main Yafi origin myth.

These sources agree that *jeru* panels were used throughout the wider Yafi area, apparently with only minor variations and in two settings: rituals to do with spirits causing diseases and rituals dealing with the spirits of the deceased.

Dealing with Disease

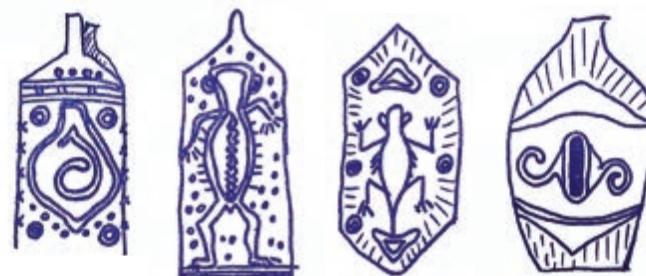
When someone was seriously ill, the *gègèr*, taking cues from the patient's dreams, would attribute this condition to the consumption of a rat, snake, turtle, or other animal possessed by a malignant spirit. The latter would be depicted on a *jeru* in black, white, and red, sometimes relatively realistically, sometimes abstractly rendered.

During the ensuing ceremony, both male and female villagers danced around the patient, who was laid out on the village plaza, while horns were blown and drums sounded. Male dancers embodying spirits carried one or two *jeru* above their heads, attached to one or two poles that were tethered to their bodies (fig. 6). At some point, two *gègèr* would emerge from the forest, their faces blackened (fig. 7) and their bodies covered with leaves. They would induce a trance by drinking a special potion, and, while trembling and speaking in high voices, remove the responsible spirit from the patient's body in the guise of some small object.⁷

Visitors from neighboring settlements would attend these events and be offered large amounts of roasted wild pig during the festivities at the conclusion of the ceremony. Afterward, the *jeru* were hung under the protruding roof of the back wall of a house to ward off further attacks by malignant spirits (figs. 8a and b).

FIG. 11: Four *jeru* (H: c. 60–70 cm) sketched by a missionary during a journey through the Yafi area in 1959.

From van de Pavert 1959, appendix.



Funerary Rites

Several sources mention the use of the same type of *jeru* in funerary ceremonies throughout the wider Yafi region.⁸ During the 1950s, the deceased would be buried with great emotion and ceremony. However, such a burial was a recent concession to the Christian missionaries. Traditionally, the corpse would be dried above a fire and then left to decay on a bier next to the house, on a scaffold high up in a sago palm tree, or in a cave. The cause of death was usually attributed to malicious human intent, and this could sometimes result in lethal violence against those deemed guilty.

After a few months, the head of the corpse would be collected for the second phase of the funerary rites, a less elaborate event during which family members, in particular the widow, would dance with the head held in a shoulder bag. When this event had finished, the head would be secreted away in the house.



“Male dancers embodying spirits carried one or two *jeru* above their heads, attached to one or two poles that were tethered to their bodies”

▲ FIG. 12: Man standing in front of a cave wall east of Amgotro, 1957. Several caves in the Yafi area have wall paintings with motifs resembling those on *jeru*.
Photo: Father Frankenmolen. J. Hoogerbrugge Archive.

Finally, usually after two or three years and several deaths, the heads would be danced with once again, day and night, this time during a collective, commemorative ceremony on a much larger scale (fig. 9). The dancing villagers would mingle with the spirits of the deceased, who emerged from the surrounding forests impersonated by men with blackened faces and bodies and clad in spectacular outfits.

At these ritual gatherings, up to several hundred attendants from the entire region would consume large amounts of roasted pork, marriages would be arranged, and marital gifts exchanged. Frankenmolen is known to have participated in such night dances honoring the dead in full ritual attire, much to the appreciation of the villagers (fig. 10).

Yafi Cave Art

Hoogerbrugge was struck by similarities between the patterns on Yafi *jeru* and certain paintings on barkcloth from Lake Sentani, approximately ninety km to the north,⁹ a subject he studied in some depth. He also points out similarities to painted figures and symbols on the walls of several caves in the wider Yafi area (fig. 12), which were documented by Frankenmolen and Galis. Some of these caves contained the remains of funerary deposits.

Frankenmolen¹⁰ reports a story the people of Menggau village told him regarding a nearby cave in vivid detail. Young men entered this cave, where they spent two nights with attractive female spirits, forgetting about their own women. When they returned to the cave later, they were cruelly killed by spirits, but their souls lived happily thereafter with their new spirit wives.



FIG. 13: Four *jeru* as drawn by civil servant R. de Haan during a visit to Amurno, a Dera-speaking settlement in the Yafi area, 1950.
From den Haan 1951, appendix.

“Hoogerbrugge was struck by similarities between the patterns on Yafi *jeru* and certain paintings on barkcloth from Lake Sentani ...”

Conclusion

Research on the role of missionaries collecting, researching, and on occasion tragically destroying indigenous ritual items in the Netherlands New Guinea has increased significantly over the past few decades. The Dutch colonial authorities had assigned the south to Catholic missions and the north to Protestant missions. By now, the Catholic Missionaries of the Sacred Heart's dealings with art among the Marind Anim and the Asmat in the south are well known. The same goes for the endeavors of the Protestant Utrecht Missionary Society along the north coast. However, this

division was not absolute and loosened in the mid-twentieth century, as shown by the activities of Father Frankenmolen, a Catholic Minorite missionary, among the people of the Yafi area. He and other sources allow us to spotlight the role of *jeru* panels in the Yafi area in that people's ritual dealings with spirits, diseases, and the dead.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. This archive is still privately held by the Hoogerbrugge family, but soon it will be donated to Leiden University.
2. For a bibliography of Jac Hoogerbrugge, see Corbey 2020.
3. Hoogerbrugge 1995: 173–174.
4. For example Inv. Nrs. TM 2130-17_z1 to TM 2130-19_z1. For two more *jeru*, see Friede 2005, fig. 362, and Casanovas & Casanovas 2024: 288 (the latter a Hoogerbrugge *jeru*).
5. Blokdijk 1953: 35.
6. Den Haan 1951; Frankenmolen 1961, 1963.
7. See, in particular, van de Pavert 1959b, a detailed description of a commemorative ceremony with some 600 attendants conducted by Dera-speaking Papuans of Kommando Village.
8. Under the title *Gourd-men of New Guinea*, the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam holds 20 minutes of 16-mm footage shot by James S. Bruce on 19 and 30 September 1961 during a commemorative ceremony in Amgotro Village, Yafi area (inv. nr. KOP20760.99.1494-0). Bruce was an American GI who had been stationed in the area at the end of WW2. Frankenmolen appears briefly in this film (see fig. 8).
9. Hoogerbrugge 1995: 174–175.
10. Circa 1960 typescript; cf. Galis 1957a, 1957b.

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National Archives of the Netherlands: 'Tourneeverslagen' (reports on tours of duty), inv. 2.10.25-125 to 2.10.25-144, Rapportenarchief van het Kantoor voor Bevolkingszaken in Nederlands Nieuw-Guinea, 1951–1962 (Onderafdeling Keerom).

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▲ FIG. 14: Single panel from a *jeru* with geometric symbols. Yafi area, Keerom River headwaters, Papua province, Indonesian New Guinea. Sago frond rib, pigment, fiber. H: 119 cm. Acquired by Jac Hoogerbrugge from Father Placidus Frankenmolen in Hollandia (present-day Jayapura), 1956. Private collection.



▲ FIG. 15: *Jeru* panel of unusual form. Yafi area, Keerom River headwaters, Papua province, Indonesian New Guinea. Sago frond rib, pigment, fiber. H: 58.5 cm. Acquired in the field on 8 July 1958. Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, inv. WM-47878.