

Embodying the Swamp: Ecological Memory and Spatial Performance in Asmat Dance from Papua

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the relationship between ecological space and choreographic structure in the traditional dance of the Asmat people of Papua, Indonesia. Drawing on the concept of embodied geography, the study explores how bodily movements are formed in response to geographical terrain—particularly swamp environments—and preserved across generations through dance. Rather than conducting fieldwork in the remote Asmat region, the research uses a visual ethnographic approach by analyzing a recorded performance of Piri Jo Ciwewi by Asmat diaspora youth in Jayapura, and interviewing cultural practitioners from the Wowpits dormitory. Key insight was provided by Mikel Pombay, an alumnus of the Dance Department at the Indonesian Institute of Arts and Culture (ISBI) Tanah Papua, who originates from the Asmat community. His narratives contextualized bodily gestures in terms of ecological adaptation, spiritual relations, and cultural continuity. Movement analysis revealed distinctive gestures such as grounded postures, lateral weight shifts, and mimetic actions that mirror canoeing, forest navigation, and animal motion—each of which corresponds to swamp-based knowledge systems. The findings affirm that Asmat dance is not only a spiritual or aesthetic practice but a spatial archive that encodes environmental experience through the body. Even when performed in diaspora, such as in urban Jayapura, the dance retains its geographic logic. This research contributes to interdisciplinary understandings of indigenous performance, proposing that traditional dance acts as a medium of ecological memory and spatial resilience.

Keywords: *Asmat Dance, Embodied Geography, Ecological Memory, Indigenous Performance, Papua*

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional dance in indigenous societies is not merely a form of aesthetic expression or entertainment, but a core element of knowledge systems, spirituality, and cultural adaptation to the environment. In Papua, particularly within the Asmat community inhabiting the swampy lowlands of southern Papua, dance articulates the relationship between humans, nature, and ancestral cosmology. The distinctive geographic setting of Asmat—comprising expansive mangrove forests, tidal swamps, and intricate river networks—has shaped not only the patterns of settlement and subsistence but also the aesthetics and physical grammar of its performance traditions [1].

In this context, Asmat dance emerges as a bodily response to environmental constraints and affordances. Movements such as low crouching, lateral shifts, and mimetic gestures of paddling or animal movement are not just symbolic representations—they are rooted in an embodied knowledge of space. The dancing body in Asmat culture encodes navigation, resistance, and relationality with the land, and functions as an ecological sensorium through which the swamp is remembered, experienced, and transmitted across generations [2].

Previous studies, such as those by [3] and [4], have discussed the symbolic and ritual dimensions of Asmat performance within frameworks of mythology and ancestor worship. However, these works often treat dance as a cultural artifact, neglecting the embodied ecological logic that underpins its movement structure. More recent work by [5] has opened the path toward interpreting dance as an adaptive strategy, highlighting how postural formations reflect responses

to soft, unstable ground. Yet, the integration of dance anthropology, cultural geography, and ecological embodiment in the Papuan context remains limited and under-theorized.

This article introduces the concept of embodied geography to understand how movement operates as a form of spatial memory and environmental adaptation. Drawing on audiovisual analysis and ethnographic interviews with members of the Asmat diaspora in Jayapura—including Mikel Pombay, an alumnus of the Dance Department at the Indonesian Institute of Arts and Culture (ISBI) Tanah Papua—this study reveals how Asmat choreography encodes environmental knowledge into bodily practice. Even in diaspora settings, the spatial memory of the swamp is preserved and reenacted through dance, indicating a mobile and resilient knowledge system.

The core research question addressed in this article is: *How does the geographical condition of the Asmat region influence the structure of movement in traditional Asmat dance?* The central hypothesis is that these movement patterns are not purely ritualistic but are products of ecological and spiritual adaptation to the terrain—particularly the waterlogged, muddy, and vegetatively dense swamplands that form the Asmat way of life.

The objective of this study is to critically analyze the correlation between Asmat choreographic form and the physical environment in which it emerged, and to offer an interdisciplinary framework combining ethnochoreology, ecological anthropology, and cultural geography. By doing so, this article contributes to an expanded understanding of traditional dance not merely as cultural heritage but as a bodily archive of spatial knowledge and a resilient system of ecological memory [6], [7].

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach combining visual ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and movement analysis to examine how Asmat traditional dance encodes ecological and spatial knowledge. The research did not involve direct fieldwork in the Asmat region due to geographical and logistical constraints. Instead, it focused on the Asmat diaspora community in Jayapura, Papua, particularly youth members actively engaged in cultural preservation through dance.

Data were collected through a layered methodology. First, audiovisual materials of a performance titled *Piri Jo Ciwewi*—created and performed by the diaspora dance group WPS-ATSY—were closely analyzed. The video, publicly available via digital platforms, presents a choreographic enactment of Asmat cosmology and environmental symbolism. The visual analysis employed frame-by-frame observation, annotation of recurring gestures, and interpretation of choreographic structures based on grounded theory and cultural semiotics. Particular attention was paid to gestures such as squatting, lateral swaying, paddle-like motions, and mimetic movements that echo interactions with the swamp terrain.



Figure 1. Collective Formation and Ritual Symmetry A moment of synchronized group movement, highlighting ritual harmony and spiritual invocation.

Source: YouTube – WPS-ATSY, <https://youtu.be/yO6asnMdfMk>

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key cultural informants from the Wowpits student dormitory in Jayapura, which houses youth from Asmat and surrounding regions. The most in-depth dialogue occurred with Mikel Pombay, an alumnus of the Dance Department at the Indonesian Institute of Arts and Culture (ISBI) Tanah Papua. As both a cultural practitioner and insider to Asmat traditions, Pombay offered crucial insights into the cultural logic, cosmological references, and ecological embeddedness of Asmat dance. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and Papuan Malay, then transcribed and translated into English for coding and analysis.

All qualitative data were thematically coded using NVivo software, allowing for cross-referencing between visual data and narrative accounts. Key analytical categories included “ecological gestures,” “memory of movement,” “swamp choreography,” and “diasporic embodiment.” Triangulation was achieved by comparing observational data, performer commentary, and cultural narratives, ensuring both depth and consistency of interpretation.

Ethical considerations were embedded throughout the research. Informed consent was obtained verbally prior to all interviews, and participants were given the opportunity to review excerpts of their narratives. The identity of Mikel Pombay is presented with permission, as he consented to being identified as both a cultural source and co-reflector of Asmat heritage. No sensitive or sacred ritual knowledge was recorded or published.

The methodological limitations of this study are acknowledged. The absence of direct observation in the Asmat homeland inevitably restricts the ecological authenticity of the data. However, this limitation is addressed by focusing on how embodied knowledge persists, transforms, and adapts within diasporic contexts. The study’s strength lies in its ability to illustrate that spatial memory and ecological choreography are not fixed to place but can be transmitted through bodies in motion, even when displaced.



Figure 2. Mikel Pombay during final dance project supervision with the author
Taken during his undergraduate thesis guidance at ISBI Tanah Papua.

Source: Mikel Pombay's documentation, 2022.

This methodological design contributes to a growing field of research in embodied ethnography, indigenous performance studies, and ecological anthropology. It prioritizes the lived experience of dancers, centers local knowledge systems, and positions performance as a site of both cultural expression and epistemic continuity. By integrating digital media analysis with oral history and movement observation, the study offers a replicable model for researching indigenous performance in contexts of displacement, mobility, and intergenerational transmission.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Asmat dance movements are deeply entangled with the geographical and ecological conditions of the Asmat homeland, even when performed by diaspora communities in urban Jayapura. The analysis reveals three dominant choreographic characteristics: grounded postures, lateral spatial orientation, and mimetic ecological gestures. Each of these traits reflects an embodied response to the environmental reality of swamp terrains, mangrove forests, and fluvial landscapes.

Grounded postures—such as deep knee bends, semi-crouched positions, and sustained low stances—dominate the choreography of *Piri Jo Ciwewi*, the key audiovisual artifact analyzed in this study. These postures reduce vertical motion and prioritize balance and weight distribution, mirroring the need for stability when moving across unstable, muddy surfaces in Asmat territory. According to Mikel Pombay, such postures are not only functional but spiritual, symbolizing humility before ancestors and the earth itself. The body's closeness to the ground also marks a cosmological alignment with the realm of spirits believed to reside in the land and water.



Figure 3. Asmat Youth Community in Jayapura Engaged in Cultural Discussion.

Source: Field documentation, 2023

Lateral spatial orientation is another recurring feature in the choreography. Rather than upward leaps or expansive vertical gestures typical of many other Indonesian traditional dances, Asmat dance favors horizontal locomotion. Side-to-side stepping patterns, shuffling movements, and rotational circling express a somatic map of terrain navigation. The swamp, as described by Pombay, “does not allow you to walk straight or tall; the body must negotiate, listen to the ground.” This orientation embodies spatial awareness and conveys an environmental attentiveness encoded in movement.

Mimetic ecological gestures further enrich the choreographic vocabulary. The dance contains recurring motifs that imitate paddling a canoe, mimicking bird calls, or embodying animals like crocodiles or hornbills. These gestures are not mere theatrical devices; they function as embodied memory tools. Pombay notes that in precolonial Asmat rituals, such movements were both performative and pedagogical—teaching children about animal behavior, river safety, and spatial orientation through repeated practice. Even in the diaspora, these movements retain their epistemic power, transmitting ecological intelligence across generations and geography.

Through thematic coding and triangulation, the analysis identified how the choreography serves as a living archive of Asmat environmental knowledge. It illustrates how dance is not simply an aesthetic display but an embodied cartography, mapping both cultural cosmology and environmental memory. In diaspora contexts, the re-performance of such dances functions as a form of spatial resilience, reaffirming identity through the reenactment of ecological belonging.

Moreover, the choreographic structure reflects not just the adaptation to physical terrain but also spiritual dimensions. Rhythmic drum beats and call-and-response vocals underscore the communal nature of movement, reinforcing relational ties between dancers and the ancestral realm. Movement is not individualized but collective, synchronized, and reciprocal—symbolizing the interconnectedness of humans, spirits, and land.

This embodied knowledge, although physically displaced from the original geography, persists through the conscious practice of diaspora dancers. The results challenge the notion that traditional dance is place-bound; instead, it emerges as a portable ecology of memory—sustained through bodies, rituals, and collective performance.

In sum, the results demonstrate that Asmat dance encodes and transmits spatial, ecological, and cosmological knowledge, even outside of its original habitat. It affirms the notion that the body, through dance, becomes both an archive and an instrument of geographic adaptation and cultural continuity.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the need to understand traditional dance not merely as an artistic expression, but as an embodiment of ecological knowledge inscribed in the body. The choreography of Asmat dance reveals that the dancer’s body serves as a medium for navigating, remembering, and interpreting geographical conditions—particularly the swamp-dominated landscapes of southern Papua. Employing the framework of *embodied geography*, this study demonstrates that Asmat dance movements are not solely shaped by aesthetic conventions, but rather by ecological and spiritual adaptations to specific environmental terrains [8]–[10].

This is supported by the theory of *ecological embodiment*, which asserts that the human body internalizes and responds to its physical environment through habitual movement. The crouched postures, lateral orientation, and mimetic gestures found in Asmat dance are not only cultural markers, but embodied responses to the unstable and aqueous terrain. These movements suggest that space is not merely a backdrop for culture—it is an active agent in shaping its expressions [11]–[13].

Significantly, even when performed in diasporic settings like Jayapura, these choreographic features persist. This persistence indicates that ecological relationships are not necessarily bound to physical proximity. Rather, they can be reactivated through collective memory and cultural practice.

In this sense, dance functions as a living archive of movement, preserving ecological, cosmological, and historical knowledge across spatial and generational distances.

The role of diaspora, as exemplified by the WPS-ATSY dance group and insights from Mikel Pombay, is vital in maintaining the continuity of this knowledge. Though physically removed from their ancestral lands, their bodies still carry and enact the memory of the swamp, river systems, and spiritual landscapes. As such, Asmat dance in diaspora becomes an act of cultural resilience, showing that the body not only moves, but also remembers and reanimates space.

This perspective introduces new possibilities within the study of Indonesian dance, especially from the eastern archipelago, which has historically received less scholarly attention. By integrating ethnochoreology, ecological anthropology, and cultural geography, this research positions traditional dance as a complex knowledge system—not merely a ritual or aesthetic practice, but a mode of human-environment relationship enacted through movement.

Furthermore, this discussion contributes to decolonial thinking in performance studies by shifting the position of Indigenous bodies from exoticized subjects to epistemic agents—bearers and producers of knowledge. In the Asmat context, the dancer's body acts as a narrator of space and time, articulating how communities understand and navigate their world.

In summary, this discussion affirms that Asmat dance is not simply a performance tradition, but a practice of *ecological embodiment* that articulates space, spirituality, and cultural identity simultaneously. It positions Asmat choreography as a vital source of alternative knowledge—highly relevant to interdisciplinary discourses on cultural sustainability, spatial memory, and human-environment relations.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how the geographical and ecological features of the Asmat region in Papua, Indonesia, influence the choreographic structure and embodied expressions found in traditional Asmat dance. Through audiovisual analysis of the performance *Piri Jo Ciwewi* and interviews with diaspora practitioners, particularly Mikel Pombay, the research illustrates how dance serves not only as a vehicle for aesthetic expression and spiritual communication, but also as a dynamic medium for environmental adaptation and memory.

The findings affirm that Asmat dance emerges as an *embodied geography*—a bodily mapping of swampy terrain, riverine pathways, and mangrove ecosystems. Movements such as low stances, lateral shifts, and mimetic gestures reflect a choreography born from ecological necessity and spiritual cosmology. These embodied forms persist even in diasporic contexts, demonstrating the resilience of spatial knowledge and the portability of cultural memory.

Importantly, this study contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary research that positions indigenous dance as a complex epistemological system. It bridges ethnochoreology, ecological anthropology, and cultural geography to offer a more nuanced understanding of traditional performance as a repository of environmental intelligence, not just heritage. In doing so, it challenges dominant narratives that frame indigenous dance as static or place-bound, and instead highlights its capacity to evolve and respond to displacement while maintaining its core spatial logic.

Future research may benefit from direct fieldwork in Asmat villages to further substantiate the embodied-environmental linkages observed here. Additionally, comparative studies with other riverine or swamp-based communities in Southeast Asia and Oceania could extend the theoretical framework introduced in this paper.

Ultimately, the study reaffirms the critical role of the body in preserving, transforming, and transmitting ecological knowledge. Asmat dance, both in origin and in diaspora, stands as a testament to how indigenous communities remember and remake space through movement.

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