



Dagger (Yina or Amia Ava)

Date

20th Century

Primary Maker

Abelam

Medium

Cassowary bone, twine and shells

Description

The uses of cassowary bone daggers are far more nuanced than the implements of cannibalism and male-exacted carnage first presented by early European anthropologists. Certainly, the primary use of these tools in the Sepik River region was utilitarian. Their edges were not sharpened but their tips were shaved down to a nail's point, making them ideal stabbing implements. Some daggers were used as hunting tools and for carving game. As tools of warfare they were used in close-range combat to finish off wounded foes or to stealthily end otherwise engaged combatants with a well-placed downwards thrust. Due to their prestige and status of both cassowary

and human bone the daggers were also used for several ritual purposes, commonly displayed initiations and other secret ceremonies. In both the Sepik and Asmat regions when these bone daggers were not being used they were usually tucked into a plaited band on a man's upper arm. The carved designs and decorations of these knives are also well-worth discussing. Sepik-area knives tend to feature some sort of incising that has further been accentuated with pigments. These designs can be geometric, featuring the same whirlpool motifs seen in other Sepik objects, but they are also known for their depictions of either human faces, animals, or the benevolent ngwalndu clan spirits that protect yam harvests and otherwise serve as boons. The ball joints of Sepik bone daggers are sometimes carved into unique zoomorphic shapes and are often wrapped in woven fiber with attached shell, Job's tears, and cassowary feather ornaments. This fiber section is generally further decorated with pigments. In some cases, a cassowary claw is attached to the tip of the bone dagger. The diminished functionality likely indicates a strictly ceremonial use. At times passive, at times fierce, cassowaries are known to attack humans—usually for food-motivated reasons—and when using their talons these skirmishes have been known to be fatal. These giant birds also occupy an important space in Papuan cosmology. Some northeast Papuan groups hold that it was a female cassowary that created land and was a progenitor to the first men. For Sepik Region groups cassowaries further symbolize both male and female attributes and are viewed as a complete

being able to reproduce autonomously. During a man's final initiation period he receives a bundle of cassowary feathers that are worn around the neck like a short cape.

Dimensions

lying flat with shell tassels extended: $14 \frac{3}{4} \times 8 \times 2$ in. (37.5 × 20.3 × 5.1 cm) upright; shell tassels are not extended: $14 \frac{5}{16} \times 2 \frac{7}{8} \times 2$ in. (36.4 × 7.3 × 5.1 cm)