Chapter IV
The initiation of male adolescents

Among the Kamoro, little ceremonial attention is given to birth and marriage. Celebrating adolescence and adulthood, however, and parting from and commemorating the dead at various stages, are sharply marked, both socially and ritually. Boys reaching adolescence wear sago-leaf aprons (tawri) around their waists, and adolescent males have their nasal septum pierced when reaching adulthood. However, the arrival of the Catholic Mission and colonial rule in the 1920s led to a discontinuation of nose piercing. This was replaced by fitting tawri aprons, much to the disappointment of the older elite, but to the relief of quite a few young men. Evidently it led to some sort of ceremonial fusion or confusion of adolescence and adulthood. No doubt the nose-piercing ceremony was, and in its tawri guise still is, the ritual focal point arousing strong emotions among young and old, men and women. During my stay in Mimika in the mid-1950s, I witnessed or heard of at least ten Tawri Kame celebrations. During Tawri Kame festivities for adults in the district centre of Kaokonao, which I attended in 1954, I noticed that the chief of the village of Mimika proper propagated the idea that Uu Kame be celebrated upon reaching adulthood instead of Tawri Kame (henceforth also referred to as ‘skirt-tying ceremony’). In the following, I concentrate on the nose-piercing ritual merged with the skirt-tying ceremony.

According to Zegwaard, the term karapao refers to the jointing beams and shoring wood set up to support the ridges of the roof. It is also used as the generic name for a ceremonial house, of a type similar to the Kaware house, used for celebrating adolescence and adulthood. In accordance with its specific functions, it is also referred to as tawri kame (literally ‘apron house’) or mirimu kame (literally ‘nose house’). The former name refers to the aprons made of sago-leaf fibres tied round the waists of boys upon reaching adolescence, and the latter to piercing the nasal septum of adolescent males upon reaching adulthood. There is a third function, which may, however, be connected with a separate temporary construction, uu kame, the ceremonial centre for adult men whose nasal septum has been pierced and who are then subjected to various tests of manhood. Nose piercing as a ritual was in fact unique to the Kamoro.
The Asmat practised it, but not as a public ceremony; it was done privately and during childhood.

The Kamoro themselves trace the nose-piercing ceremony back to the Utukae groups who then lived in the Koperapoka area to the east. While celebrating Mirimu Kame, these were attacked by the Naeweripi from the far eastern part of Mimika, who also practised nose piercing. The Utukae fled westwards. The groups living there borrowed or stole their nose-piercing tools and adopted the ceremony. Unlike Ema Kame and Kaware, the origin of the nose-piercing ritual is not ascribed to culture heroes, although it is associated with two mythical warlords, Aoweyao and Mbiminareyao, who led the attack on the Utukae. Their acts, their ultimate defeat, and the dispersal of the Utukae are narrated and sung about during Mirimu Kame.

Obviously, celebrating the nose-piercing ritual and the skirt-tying ceremony requires considerable preparation. Work, social obligations, prestige, play and ritual are intertwined. Work is motivated by this whole complex, and in this respect differs greatly from work in a modern, Western setting. In the following, a detailed account is therefore given of the ceremonies and the preparation for them.

The house in which the ceremony is performed has a wide front covered
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with mats, like the Kaware house. Its projecting roof is supported by eight or nine poles and slopes down at the back. It has four to eight openings, depending on the number of initiates. Each initiate has his own entrance. The house is some 17 metres wide, 6 metres high, and 5 metres deep. There is a porch (mbiti) between the front wall and the end of the overarching roof. This porch is protected from outside view by a row of mats hung parallel to the front wall behind it, and by sago leaves at the sides. The initiation takes place on this porch.

Making and erecting spirit poles; collecting the food

One of the first tasks is the making and erecting of one or more spirit poles, which represent fairly recently deceased community members of repute, male or female. (For details on the cutting down, transportation and erection of the spirit poles, see the description of Kaware in Chapter III.) The selection of persons to be honoured is a delicate matter, requiring much deliberation and display of power. The initiates attend all activities and are thus introduced to the various ritual roles (including their own) and the meanings of these. As usual, actors and dignitaries operate according to the division between ‘right’ and ‘left’, corresponding to ‘root’ (mapere) and ‘surface’ (ipere) knowledge, and to leader and follower. The dignitary entitled to cut down the tree – the actual work is, in fact, done by his sisters’ husbands, his bride-receivers – delivers a speech boasting of his status and heroic deeds to impress the living and the dead. He then delivers the first blow with his axe, while calling out the name of his mother or ancestress. The hole into which the spirit pole will be inserted is covered with mats and lime: it is a sacred site. The spirits of the persons represented by the statue are believed to attend the ceremony from the underworld. Male adolescents carrying the spirit pole in a horizontal position, directed by an older dignitary, ‘vitalize’ the statue: it, or rather he/she, moves. It is asked whether an enemy is intending to attack the community during the celebration – in earlier times there was a real risk of this happening. The question is answered by the statue moving to indicate no. The living spirit pole is then carried around the settlement by the men. Women and children stay inside behind closed doors. The dead and the carvers are addressed and highly praised. Emotions run high; the statue is embraced and adolescents dance on it. After the spirit pole is erected, one or more dignitaries, followed and protected by their bride-receivers, climb the statue. They embrace the statue and set their teeth into the wood as a sign of admiration for the carvings. One of them, the imakatiri, calls out the names of groups living in the vicinity. He announces the celebration and invites them to attend.
Meanwhile, the timber required for building the Karapao house is collected and prepared. The Tama song and the Ore song are performed by women and men respectively, the women delivering strips of pandanus bark for sewing the atap, while sago for roofing the house is the men’s responsibility. There is also a mock war between the sexes. Assembling the wood and collecting large quantities of food are accompanied by ceremonies that are to ensure an optimal result. An abundance of food can be called for by acts and performances based on the major principle of cosmological classification, ipu enakoa (explained by Coenen 1963:43-8). All phenomena of nature, including humankind, are believed to be interconnected and to share one soul. This is why there are performances by specific dignitaries, and this is why particular plants, shrubs, leaves and trees, which are believed to be connected with sago, fish, pig, lizard, shellfish, and so on, are used or referred to in these performances and in other rituals. Both rituals (Tama Tao and Ore Tao) call for these items of food to present themselves in abundance. Therefore, the men and
women manipulate the cosmological system by playing (almost literally) this interconnection to their advantage.

**Sago magic**

For collecting sago, magic is required. Magic is an empty term unless explained and specified, as I now proceed to do. Sago magic consists of three elements, the first being ‘there is sago’ (*amaa poka*). Before people leave for the sago grounds, two male sago dignitaries, who wield power over sago, ritually announce that ‘we people, as we are used to do in this particular situation, are leaving for such-and-such sago areas where sago is abundant’. This is an official statement that implicitly serves as an exhortation to the sago spirits (*amaa mbi*). On the eve of departure for the sago areas, the leader of the sago people summons two female sago dignitaries, adorned with sago paraphernalia. All the men assemble, but all the women stay indoors. The leader of the sago people then summons the sun: ‘Sun, shine upon the mature sago palms and fill them; let all areas be full of palms,’ specifying the sago areas. Then the female sago spirits and the men go in a procession past the houses and boys shoot arrows made from ribs of sago leaves.

The second element of the magic is ‘sago rattan’ (*amaa keme*), involving three ‘sago people’ dressed up as three varieties of parrot often seen in sago areas. They perform dances near and on the rectangular collective sago container in front of the ceremonial house. Their leader announces that the birds and the sago palms of the area will grow and be abundant. Recall that birds and sago palms are viewed as having a soul (*ipu*).

The third element is ‘sago medicine’ (*amaa oto*). Two or more fully dressed-up sago dignitaries hide behind shrubs in the vicinity of the village. The initiates proceed to these shrubs, followed by older men singing and playing drums, remove the shrubs, and then confront the sago men. Then follows an act in which they uproot leaved twigs, which were ‘planted’ there for this purpose. The leaves, which are associated with sago and are ‘of one soul’ with it, are removed by the spectators and brought to the ceremonial house. This is done in two processions, a ‘right’ one and a ‘left’ one, both preceded by a man displaying a ceremonial staff (*pokay*). Two female sago dignitaries carrying a bag of sago on their backs join them. On the porch of the ceremonial house, the male sago dignitaries take a handful of sago from the bags and mix it secretly with the shredded leaves. Proclaiming that the bride-receivers have dutifully produced a large quantity of sago, they then throw it into a large rectangular container. All the men present follow their example. Mixing the sago with the leaves is believed to ensure that all cylindrical containers taken to the large rectangular box will be filled to the brim.
**Pig ritual and hunt**

Although hazardous and unpredictable, hunting pigs is by far the most exciting part of all major ceremonies. It is therefore surrounded by taboos, such as abstaining from sexual intercourse and from the consumption of various kinds of fish, and it involves various hunting rituals aimed at attracting animals to the location of the bait (kawata). Pieces of adjacent sago palms are cut down and divided up for this purpose. In the four villages of Kaokonao (about 500 inhabitants) where I attended the skirt-tying ritual in 1954, ten wild pigs were killed. A number of working parties prepared the location of the bait and constructed a fence nearby in order to spear the animals at night while they were eating. The hunters were covered with lime and had their faces blackened in order not to be seen by the animals.

The preparatory hunting rituals include ‘pig tails’ (o mipi) and ‘pig spirits’ (o mbi). In the pig ritual, a number of pig dignitaries, ‘pig people’ (o we), paddle to an area to collect pig medicine (o oto). This consists of the leaves of a particular shrub, rattan, orchids and palms. When they return to the village they behave like victorious hunters, throwing lime as a token of their success. When the villagers question them about the success of the hunt, they respond positively. The women then line up in front of the Karapao house, their backs decorated with the leaves collected by the men, dancing and singing in a frenzy. A successful hunt is imitated and thus invoked. The leaves of the hunters and women evoke the image of pig tails: they are of one spirit.

In the pig ritual, the pig men assemble near the entrance of the ceremonial house around sunset (on the same day as the preparatory rituals), dressed up as pigs and wearing pig leaves. The leader of the sun dignitaries addresses the setting sun, a very emotional moment. He summons the sun, or rather ‘he who sits on the sun’, to be his witness in summoning the pigs: ‘Pigs, do you hear me? Draw close from afar and come to our place [specifying the name].’ Behaving like pigs and making pig sounds, the pig men stroll past the houses and hit the buildings with smouldering sticks. The leader carries a wooden image of a pig. When they have all returned to the ceremonial house, the leader of the sun people then names the location of the bait, and exclaims that ‘the dogs will attack the pigs ferociously and the hunters will spear them’. Two images of a pig, cut from the spine of a palm leaf, are then placed in the ceremonial house, and prepared sago is offered to them.

According to information from Kaokonao, corroborated by Zegwaard and Coenen, pig women, dressed up with pig leaves, come crawling to the ceremonial house, begging for sago and firewood. They take this home, where they roast the sago and give it to the children, who, just as their mothers did, start crawling and behaving like pigs.

Informants also told me that the calls of various types of parrot and of the
Embrace. Having speared a pig the night before on the occasion of Karapao, Petrus Taniyu was honoured as a hero by all the women. Timika Pantai, Mimika, 1997. From Pickell 2002:185. Photograph by Kal Muller.
forest hen were imitated as a request not to alarm the pigs when the hunters approached. Zegwaard witnessed a ritual in Mioko (Kamora River) in which the arrival of pigs at the location of the bait was mimicked. Two rows of men lined up on the riverside and watched the ‘pigs’ coming from the bush and approaching the imaginary *kawata*. When the men ‘speared’ the ‘pigs’ with their spears, drumming rose to a crescendo. Then the ‘pigs’ fell down. The scene was repeated: this time the ‘pigs’ played dead. The pig leaves were then laid near the spirit pole at the entrance of the house as an invitation to human spirits to assist the living in killing many pigs. In the village of Yaraya, I was told that a gong, a precious object, was offered to the ‘soul’ of an ironwood tree, again associated with pigs and the power of pigs. The gong was removed if the hunt was successful.

About this time, the hunters waiting at night behind the temporary fence move cautiously, observing absolute silence. With a magical stick they entice pigs to the location of the bait and spear them. Early in the morning they light a fire and, using smoke signals, inform villagers of the presence of the pigs and their location. When the hunters arrive in the village with the game on their shoulders, the onlookers, especially the women, behave like frenzied lunatics. They praise the hunters liberally and embrace them. The more they praise them, the better the chance of receiving their share of the meat. Special pig men hang the butchered pigs from the walls inside the Karapao house. Secret rattles, operated by men in the Karapao house, add mystery to the excitement.

Tree lizard ritual

The tree lizard ritual aims at obtaining ‘tree lizard medicine’ (*oko oto*). To this end, two lizard dignitaries, one from the ‘right’ and one from the ‘left’, go out to collect a certain kind of leaves, leaving them attached to the twig. Back in the village, they rip the leaves from the twigs and store them in a mat. At dusk two rows of men, ‘right’ and ‘left’, stride through the village, accompanied by drumming. The two lizard dignitaries announce formally that there will be many lizards. All the men then scatter the shredded leaves on the ground, thus making a track that will assist the lizard hunters to locate the trees where the lizards (iguanas) can be found. The animals are caught alive, tied up, and taken to the village. Two of the lizards are ceremonially killed in the Karapao house, thus setting the stage for killing the others at home. ‘Things have to be done in an orderly way,’ as my informants in Kaokonao explained. Two lizards, one from the ‘right’ and one from the ‘left’, their skin stripped off in the middle, are displayed on a rack, together with a headdress for singers, two dancing skirts made of cassowary quills, a bundle of cassowary feathers to be
used as leg decoration, and a zigzag-shaped wooden object for encouraging the sun to rise. This rack is placed in front of the central spirit pole. ‘Right’ and ‘left’ each have their own display rack. The articles displayed may vary, as I observed in three Kaokonao villages.

Shellfish for the initiation ceremony

Fish is another important item in the diet, as well as for gift giving on the occasion of an initiation ceremony. Special emphasis is laid on the preparation of a dish consisting of a special kind of mussel (*onaki*, also a generic name) and sago. The preparation of the dish is begun formally in the ceremonial house. Two *onaki* men (not women), from ‘right’ and ‘left’, beat two mussels against each other. The shellfish fall on a mat and are mixed with sago. The *onaki* men name the women involved in collecting the mussels. Only then will the women start working. They wrap the mixture in leaves, which they tie up into small parcels about 20 centimetres long – some of them wider or larger, for some special purpose – and then roast these. The mothers, sisters, and female cousins of each of the initiates prepare large quantities separately. The roasted parcels arouse vivid emotions, since they connote the mothers’ and sisters’ close ties with the initiates. The former once nursed the initiate, and now the nose-piercing ceremony (or its substitute) marks the coming of age, the parting from the family of procreation, and the expectation that the initiate will soon establish his own family. In the afternoon, each of the initiates will be standing on a mat in front of his parents’ house, being dressed and made up by his close relatives. The boys will be wearing colourful new cloth as sashes worn across the chest, and a new loincloth, while red paint and white dots are applied to his body. The relatives also dress up.

All initiates will then, still in the afternoon, walk past the houses of the village, each followed by their mothers, sisters, fathers and other relatives and preceded by an older brother or a brother-in-law who carries a spear or a machete. The guild of singers and drummers also take part in this procession. They halt at the living quarters of the initiate’s real or classificatory sisters, as well as at the homes of his mother’s brothers. His mother or his sister will then take one or more mussel-and-sago parcels from a bag she is carrying and hand these to the initiate. He in turn presents these to his sister or the wife of his mother’s brother, as a token of appreciation for the services of their husbands; this act is reciprocated by the initiate receiving young shoots of the sago palm in return. The roasted parcels are eaten immediately. This ceremony clearly marks all the persons involved individually: honour to whom honour is due. Thereupon the initiates and their retinue stride around the sago containers, the location of the initiation. They offer the larger roasted parcels to the two
sago dignitaries, who are standing on the container. Their gift is reciprocated with a crockery plate. The real initiation will take place the next day.

_Sago supply for the initiation ceremony_

Compared to the elaborate social and ritual preparations described above, the initiation itself is a fairly straightforward affair. Even so, one major preparatory event that is given much emphasis deserves mentioning: the construction and filling of the two or more collective sago containers already briefly referred to. These are constructed on the porch of the Karapao house, preferably one for each initiate. The initiation will take place on top of these sturdy rectangular containers (wu). The containers are constructed a few days before the initiation. The construction of the containers is initiated ceremonially by pushing two thick long rattan canes through the front wall of the Karapao house. The resulting scratching noise is supposed to frighten the women. The canes protrude slightly. They will be used at a later stage for lashing down the top cover of the container. Under the canes, sago branches are laid down and fastened with wooden pins. These form the bottom of the container, together with plaited strips of sago leaves, measuring some 50 by 125-150 centimetres. A latticework of sticks is erected around the bottom, which is covered with plaited strips of sago leaves. The height of the container depends on the amount of sago that the initiates’ bride-receivers deliver. They are the ones who construct the containers. Then sago crumbs are thrown into the collective containers in the Amaa Oto or sago magic ritual. This ceremony formally launches the delivery of the cylindrical individual containers of sago that will be placed in the collective containers, a delivery that is to proceed rapidly. Each of these individual containers is marked by the giver and carried to the collective containers by the bride-receivers – not by the women, who usually carry them on their backs. There is a ‘right’ and a ‘left’ collective container, the distinction depending on the givers, not on the receivers, for instance the parents or brothers of the woman whose son or brother is going to be initiated.

While the individual containers are being delivered, the names of the givers are enumerated loudly by the guild of singers and drummers. Onlookers watch closely who is giving and how much, the prestige of both givers and receivers being at stake. Givers are praised; there is much commotion. When all the individual containers that had been stored at individual homes are piled up in the collective containers, or stacks, as I shall call them henceforth, they are covered with mats. The rattan canes in the front wall of the Karapao house are pulled out and used to lash the stack together firmly, thus creating platforms. The fence is removed to reveal the platforms so that they can be inspected and admired. A rattan construction depicting the bow of a canoe is
attached to the front of the stacks, the sides of the platform being decorated with ‘fingers’ (*maare*, a generic term for protrusions) and with rattan models of birds’ nests.

The stacks, the way of lashing them together, and their decoration with the bow of a canoe are reminiscent of the Asmat stacks of sago grubs.

*The sun dance*

The initiation is preceded by the sun dance (*Yao Ndi*), a night of dancing that starts around sunset and reaches its climax when the sun begins to rise. In the afternoon singers, drummers and dancers gather in the ceremonial house, where they dress up, paint their bodies, put plaited bands and belts (*makara*) round their arms, legs and chests and cassowary quills round their hips. A big fire is made in front of the house and the guild of drummers performs the sunset song, lowering the drums from time to time, in accordance with the movement of the sun. The ‘left’ leading singer or drummer answers the song of the ‘right’ one – one of multiple manifestations of reciprocity – in a compelling rhythm. While women and children watch eagerly, a leading dancer moves out in a staccato of mighty gestures and passes, as if in trance, aiming his bow and arrow in all directions. The others, all of them dancers specially trained for this particular occasion, follow one by one. Women sing, praise and dance. One dancer after the other jumps over the fire. The fathers precede their younger brothers, sons, and sisters’ sons. The dancers face each other in two rows and dance, turning, raising and lowering their bodies. After the show the onlookers join them. This goes on and on.

At dawn, tension increases. The singers recite the names of settlements, beginning in the far eastern part of Mimika and proceeding to Kaokonao (where I witnessed the celebration), following and describing the course of the rising sun. The two leading drummer-singers answer each other, raising their drums to their faces. It is a magnificent show. No mistakes should be made, in order to avoid the risk that the sun will not rise. A sun dignitary shoots burning arrows in the direction of the rising sun to emphasize and encourage the sunrise. (In Kaokonao, at this very moment on 31 December 1954, the shooting was stopped by a priest who broke the arrows in order to prevent a presumed case of rain magic. It did rain most of the night, and the sun did not rise – the sunrise was invisible; according to my informants this was because of the priest’s intervention.) The sun dance and ritual stop at about 7 a.m.; the exhausted participants then get some sleep.

In the morning a group of dancing women place sago balls on a mat in front of the ceremonial house, where the fence was partially removed the day before. One of them gives a bowl containing a small ball of sago and a pair of
tongs to two male dignitaries. These (and not the women) roast the ball and then break the tongs, signifying that the pork should be taken from the walls, placed next to the sago balls, and distributed.

The final ceremony: nose piercing

For the final ceremony, the ‘right’ and ‘left’ initiates, fully dressed up, sit on their heels to the right and left of and facing the entrance. Each is accompanied by two of his bride-receivers squatting to his right and left. The two ‘right’ and ‘left’ ceremonial leaders of this ritual sit in the centre, the singers and drummers behind them. This is a solemn moment. Male and female relatives and others stand or sit at the back of the ceremonial house. Each of the two leaders recites an introductory song. The male and female relatives (not the affines) sing and weep. The two leaders touch the initiates’ noses (a clear allusion to the nose-piercing ceremony that is yet to come) and weep loudly.

Then the drumming and singing stop. Parts of the right wall and of the left wall are successively removed. The right and left initiates pretend to flee through the opening, but are followed by a yelling, weeping and shouting crowd. The initiates are seized and taken to the stacks, carried on the shoulders of the bride-receivers. Each of the initiates mounts his own platform. Then the two bride-receivers remove the sashes across the initiate’s chest, put the initiate down on the platform, hold his head between their knees, and pierce his nose septum in five stages, using sharp pins of palm wood (amupao) of ever-increasing thickness and size. (According to a myth, the shavings of the pins, when cut, turn into clouds of stinging mosquitoes.) The bride-receivers call out the names of their mother or ancestress. The successive pins increase in length from about 25 centimetres to one or two metres. Their length depends on the number of bride-receivers, varying from five to ten, who clench the pin with both hands as a ceremonial obligation (as observed by Father Tillemans in the 1930s). The blood drips from the platform and is licked up by frenzied mothers. The bleeding is stopped by putting fresh sago leaves in the septum. Causing grief and pain to the victims, though unavoidable, is deplored by the bride-receivers, who as a rule are expected to handle their bride-givers with care. My key assistant told me that formerly, when nose piercing was still performed, the bride-receivers would surreptitiously rub the septum with lime beforehand, so that it would be thin on the day of piercing, in order to ease the pain. Moreover, before applying the pins they secretly pierced the septum with their sharp fingernails. During the operation there is loud weeping and crying. Mothers and others cling to the victims’ feet and weep. When the piercing has been completed, the crying initiates are carried to their homes on the shoulders of the bride-receivers and nursed with compassion. After the nose-
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piercing (alternatively: skirt-tying) ceremony, the socially recognized new adults are to some extent entitled to have sexual intercourse, which enables them to learn the art of lovemaking. Immediately after the ceremony, a mock fight begins, which may go on for hours. The women chase the men, in particular those who have performed the piercing, and hit them with smouldering sticks, lumps of mud, and so on. The men try to escape, and are not supposed to retaliate. An older man formally announces the end of this sometimes very aggressive mock fighting, and the sticks are thrown into a heap to signify the end. Two dignitaries ceremonially cut the rattan canes tied around the sago stacks. The givers of the individual cylindrical containers then carry the sago back to their homes and distribute it.

The alternative skirt-tying ceremony that I observed, in which long skirts made of young sago leaves are tied round the hips, is by and large similar to the nose-piercing ceremony. In former times, it is said that about one year passed between the initiation of boys and the initiation of adolescents. After the skirts are tied up, the bride-receivers cut off the edges. Then they knock two mussels over the head of the initiate; the fluid drips over his shoulders and body and is licked up by the bride-receivers. The cut-off sago shreds are set ablaze. The initiates extinguish the fire while jumping over it, assisted by their mothers. This is probably a cleansing ceremony (see next section).

The bride-receivers then line up to poke the initiates in the ribs quite forcefully. This calls for revenge by the relatives and sets the mock battle in motion.

It is obvious that sago and mussels and the combination of the two play a dominant role in the preparation and performance of initiation. However, this does not mean that there is a mechanical link between growth and fertility. When I asked a well-versed informant whether the initiates, while standing on the sago stack, acquire strength and growth from the sago, he smiled and denied it. As evidence for his opinion, he mentioned the well-known narrative of Aoweyao and Mbiminareyao, the strong giants and warlords who ousted the Utukae and by this act set the great western migration in motion.1 When these ‘brothers’ wanted to have their nose septum pierced, hardly anybody in the settlement was willing to assist them. So they pierced each other’s noses or were assisted by their ‘father’ – a shameful act and very much against the rules – while standing on a mini-stack, since hardly any sago was delivered for the occasion. ‘Yet,’ my informant said, ‘these two adolescents quickly grew into giants. So it was not the sago that did it. It is not the sago but the men who matter and are important.’ This was a clever and thoughtful answer. It is not

1 For the narrative, see Offenberg and Pouwer 2002:168-71.
the sago or the mussels that matter – it is the classificatory system of relations between flora, fauna, objects, natural phenomena, and humans which does it, as used and manipulated by persons who are entitled to do so.

The initiation of male adolescents into adulthood

The Uu Kame (literally ‘hair-extension house’) ceremony is closely related to the Karapao rituals. It could even be considered as the final stage of Karapao. It is, however, discussed separately here, since it requires a house of its own. Zegwaard attended its celebration in Atuka, east of Kaokonao, in November 1951 (Zegwaard 1995:311-5). I saw it celebrated in Mimika proper, in one of the villages in the administrative centre of Kaokonao, on 5 May 1954. It is useful to compare the two descriptions, because they are similar in many respects and yet different. As mentioned earlier, the headman of Mimika would prefer this ceremony to replace the present skirt-tying ceremony, since the latter combines the celebration of adolescence and adulthood.

Formerly, Uu Kame was celebrated when the adolescents whose noses had been pierced had recovered from its ill effects. In the first stage the participants part from their childhood. In the second stage, their abilities and skills for adulthood are taught and tested. In the third stage they are provided with the insignia of adulthood: hair extension, anus shield, and penis cover.

A separate house, roughly similar to the longhouses beside a river in a sago area, is built and the initiates stay there for some time. In Atuka, the shed built for the occasion was two metres high at the front and closed off on three sides with sago leaves. In the front wall only a metre was left open in its upper part.

The first stage: parting from childhood

The participants are fed on the soft seeds of the pandanus palm, small mussels, and crabs, as if they are children. Their brothers-in-law feed them fish, first taking a bite themselves and then pushing the remainder into the mouths of the ‘children’. Male relatives encourage them to go inside the hut, whereas female relatives dance outside. The ‘children’, painted with lime, ashes and ochre, are then exposed to thick smoke and heat rapidly building up from fires of easily combustible material over the full length of the back of the shed. Fathers and brothers join them, men standing shoulder to shoulder. The adolescents begin to sweat heavily. Their mothers and sisters outside come as near as possible and empty bamboo containers filled with water over the shoulders of their sons and brothers. This action is repeated many times. The brothers-in-law lick up the water running from the adolescents’ shoulders.
This exposure to smoke and water is meant to cleanse and purify the body and soul of evil ‘smells’. It is practised both in Mimika and Asmat, for people exposed to the world of foreigners on board ships or while working as contract labourers in port towns. In this particular case there were twelve young men who had recently returned from doing contract labour in Sorong. The ‘shower’ ritual just described is meant to remove the ill effects of a specific period that has ended, namely boyhood and adolescence.

The second stage: demonstrating skills

There are several skills to be taught and demonstrated, including:
1. The use of bow and arrows. For this purpose, the guild of archers pushes a plank from an old canoe into the ground as a target. The oldest man then shoots the first arrow, followed by his ‘brothers’, his ‘sisters’ sons’ and then his own ‘sons’. The adolescents follow suit, aided by the experienced ones.
2. Spear throwing: this follows the same procedure as the shooting of the first arrow.
3. Asking for sago: the leader of the already initiated age mates beats a drum and forcefully asks his mother for sago while calling her names, both literally and figuratively. He adds: ‘You with the red genitals.’ The initiates follow suit. By doing so they show their superiority over the women: ‘We are the boss at home’ (or so it seems).
4. Fish spearing: the ceremonial ‘fish man’, the initiates, and their supervising brothers-in-law all board canoes and depart for the sea while throwing lime in the direction of the sea. En route the initiates follow the example of their supervisors by scooping up handfuls of fresh water from the river. At sea the brothers-in-law throw coconut shells into the water. These represent fish, which they spear. The adolescents follow suit, assisted by their supervisors.

The third stage: providing the insignia of manhood

This stage, it should be added, was not performed in my presence. The adolescents are painted all over with lime, ochre and ashes. They are provided with decorative bands for their upper arms and calves, and with sashes across their chests. Thin strips of yellow fibres of sago leaf, plaited into cords 15-20 centimetres in length, are attached to their hair. These are draped over the back of the head and the neck. It is interesting to note that the Kamoro language has the same word for attaching hair extensions and for piercing the nasal septum: uu, which literally means ‘to take care of the head’. Three kinds of ornaments may be inserted into the nasal septum: two pieces of a hornbill’s
beak held together and glued with string and resin, two equal segments of a shell, or two pig’s tusks. Last but not least, the initiates are provided with an anus shield made of seashell, and a penis shell or a richly ornamented bamboo penis sheath.2

In the village of Mimika, I observed some additional demonstrations. Squatting adolescents are lined up in two rows, facing each other, and, while dancing, make gestures like scooping water from a creek until a kind of mud fish can be seen and grabbed, upon which they also make the grabbing movements. Catching this type of fish is exhausting and rates as an endurance test.

Another performance involves hopping around in circles in a squatting position on the floor while imitating the cry of a hornbill, signified in Kamoro narratives as a lovebird and associated with marriage and intercourse. The bride-receivers keep the initiates hopping and squatting by pushing them down repeatedly. This demonstration takes place in the shed or in a makeshift longhouse. The adolescents sweat all over their bodies. Women, mothers and sisters offer relief by showering them with water from bamboo tubes. Then, suddenly, two legs of a male person appear, piercing the roof and frightening both the initiates and the women.

In Kaokonao and in West Mimika an interesting variant of hair extension is practised. It was part of the ritual in the village of Mimika, where the cords fastened to the hair do not hang over the neck and shoulder, but are tied up instead, forming a sort of crown on the head. It is sometimes depicted in models of spirit poles made for tourists. There are even two or three variations on this type of hair extension. This could well be an interesting ceremonial innovation on the traditional type of hair extension, well known from the Asmat, but not practised in Mimika for at least seventy years.