CHAPTER XI

Asmat headhunting and the initiation of male adolescents

The myths

We owe a description of headhunting and its complement of male initiation first and foremost to Zegwaard's (1959:1020-41) classic paper in the *American Anthropologist*. The paper is based on a narrative type of information provided by his main informant, the war leader Warsekomen of Shuru, himself an expert in headhunting. In addition, a slightly varying but most interesting story was told to Bishop Sowada by Pirimbu (65) of Biwar in 1979 (Sowada 1980b). In the 1950s Pirimbu, a violent and hot-headed war leader, had been the terror of the region. He accidentally killed his wife an hour before Zegwaard's arrival on one of his tours. He was both feared and praised in the village.¹ Another narrative he told Sowada about Cowoc-Biwar, the primeval mother of Biwar, puts the male practice of headhunting in a female-oriented cosmological setting.²

In Chapter X, I summarized the mythical introduction of headhunting by the younger brother Beworpik's severing of his brother Desoipic's head at the latter's own request. The talking head of the victim [an archaic precursor of the modern TV 'talking head'] spells out how to handle the victim's body and how to celebrate the initiation of young males. The story has it that Desoipic was disappointed about being offered merely a pig's head, pinned to the floor by the point of a dagger thrust into the pig's throat. He demanded a human head for consumption, and since there were no heads of other people around, it would have to be his own head. Pirimbu's story offers an interesting alternative to Desoipic's dog-bites-its-own-tail request: On the upper reaches of the Sirec, near another river specified as the Brazza, and downstream of the Sirec [note the dualistic set-up] lived two couples. These couples initiated the domestication of wild boars. Their offspring, the wild pigs, increased so much in number

¹ Offenberg and Pouwer 2002:252, note 1.

² Sowada 1980c; for an earlier account, unclear on some points, see Offenberg and Pouwer 2002:197-201.

that they began to attack people and to make their lives miserable by causing many wounds. So the men began to wage a war on the pigs. However, the battle was so uneven that the people became dispirited. Fortunately, one day a man called Beworpic – the younger brother in Warsekomen's story – managed to kill a huge wild boar. He cut off its head. The people, in a vengeful mood, tore the boar's body to pieces, cooked the pieces, and feasted on the animal's flesh. Beworpic and his men launched other expeditions and killed many pigs. [The story implies that humans then succeeded in getting the upper hand.] On one occasion Beworpic killed yet another boar, severed its head, and stuck his cassowary dagger through its neck until the point of the dagger protruded from the boar's snout. He then called his wife Tewaterowoc [here she is again] into the ceremonial house and placed her on a mat in front of the central fireplace. Spreading her legs, he placed the boar's head between them. Tewaterowoc was elated at being honoured in this lofty manner. The next day she was dressed up and decorated by her husband with soft sago fronds in her hair, woven bands on her arms, and a finely woven belt around her waist. He also tied a cuscus fur crown on her forehead and inserted a bone through the septum of her nose. He gave her a fine carrying bag in which he put the boar's skull. She proudly carried the bag wherever she went. However, she complained that the teeth and tusks of the skull cut sharply into her back while she was gathering food, harvesting sago, or fishing. She suggested to her husband that a human skull [without jaws] would be more convenient. She addressed her husband and the people: 'You and I hear a man shouting at the headwaters. His name is Siwet. Go and kill him.' [Knowing the victim's name is imperative in headhunting.] Beworpic and his men took her advice, located Siwet, and killed him. Beworpic's first act was to sever Siwet's head. He then shared the flesh with the other men [as he had shared the flesh of the boar; note the parallel]. This head turned into a 'talking head', who gave instructions about the proceedings of the feast and ritual, the decorations, and so on. 'When you make a mbish pole, carve my features exactly. Call me Siwet or Mbish.' [Compare this with the female Mbish of the story in Chapter IX.] Beworpic placed Siwet's head between his wife's legs, but the talking head exclaimed: 'You have placed me incorrectly. Turn my head around so that it faces Tewaterowoc, with the dagger protruding from my mouth.'

This story not only circumvents the 'incestuous' fratricide of Warsekomen's version, but also introduces the (male-derived) honour bestowed on the killer's wife, which is part of the ritual. Further, it allows for a female initiative in the introduction of hunting human heads, by reason of the pig's skull hurting the wife's back – an amusing afterthought. Waging war on people is modelled after hunting pigs. The head is a trophy and the protruding dagger a clear symbol of male prestige.

Pirimbu's story proceeds from the animal to the human sphere: Beworpic

decorated his wife as he had done for the boar's head ceremony. He added momentum to it by painting her with white lime enlivened with red ochre. The people drummed and danced through the night. On the third day of feasting, Beworpic and his people took Tewelowoc and placed her in the central section of his canoe [note the male-centric wording]. She stood sullenly while the men rowed downstream. At the ceremonial house Beworpic presented her with a new carrying bag containing Siwet's skull. She decorated the skull with cassowary feathers and with grey and red seeds. [Note the progression and the amplification in the ritual, moving towards the final episode, which consists of the initiation of a male adolescent. In the ritual it is the male adolescent who stands sullenly in the central section of the canoe, and it is to him that a decorated skull is presented.]

The story continues as follows. When some time had passed, Beworpic gave the command to haul the canoes onto the riverbank in order to dry and seal them. They then went downstream on the Sirec and discovered some people hunting for food. Beworpic captured one man and stabbed him with his cassowary dagger. The man shouted: 'Why kill me?!' Beworpic answered: 'It is necessary for us to make war.' He proceeded to stab the man through his shoulders. He placed the body in an upright position in his dugout and decorated him with white lime. When he arrived at the village he beheaded the dead man and placed the head in front of the fireplace. The people celebrated with drumming and singing. During the evening Beworpic sat his son Ariwetekap on a mat in front of the fireplace and placed the head between his legs. He repeated the ceremony he had performed for Tewelowoc. [The story gives all the details again.]

I have rendered the narrative almost verbatim in order to bring out its four-layered composition, which legitimates the social institution and convention of waging interhuman and intergroup warfare on the model of humans waging war with pigs. The first episode of the story establishes the war between humans and pigs, concluding with the triumphant beheading of a boar. The second episode connects this war and its pig's head trophy with the paying of tribute to the killer's wife (and her kinfolk). In the third episode a human head replaces the pig's head, which adds to the wife's male-derived honour and convenience. The fourth episode connects both headhunting and the honouring of wife and mother with the initiation of adolescent sons and their classificatory equivalents. War/headhunting, male prestige, revenge, reverence for wife and mother, and male adolescent initiation aimed at replacing the dead (see below) thus became normative and related features of Asmat society. Zegwaard (1959:1020) rightly stresses the point that cannibalism is not the objective of headhunting but only a subsidiary part of it. For the participants, the consumption of human flesh is analogous to vengefully eating

the flesh of the boar, the killing and decapitation of which served as a model for human headhunting.

As to revenge, the story ends with Tewaterowoc being abducted by the victim Siwet. Siwet runs away with Tewaterowoc, explaining: 'Why did you ask your husband to kill me? Now I wish to marry you.' By doing so Siwet initiated the chain of revenge, including the capturing of women.

The third narrative, about Cowoc-Biwar, the female founder of Biwar (*cowoc* means woman), also told by Pirimbu, provides headhunting with maternally inherited vigour. It relates headhunting to the occupation of territory and to the dispersion of people, and to localized cosmological power. Cowoc-Biwar is represented as an imposing woman, the leader of her group. She was peculiar in that she, throughout her life, never had sexual relations with her husband Baiku (1979 version), yet, and equally peculiarly, produced offspring. She was a man-woman, *yipic-cowoc* (1954 version). Initially she lived with her people on the upper reaches of the Sirec River, indicated as its tail (*epmak*) and at present known as the Brazza River. One day she decided to find a new place of residence. With her older and younger brothers, her husband, and a good number of others, she travelled downstream and settled on the Sor River, near present-day Biwar-on-land (Indonesian: *darat*). From there she and her people explored the Powec, Asewec, Undir, Pomac and Fai Rivers and, via the coast, also the Yec, Binar and Oap Rivers. So she is presented as opening up the entire Asmat region north and northwest of the Sirec River, where she placed various individual 'brothers' on various specified rivers. She herself returned to the Sor River. After giving orders that the canoes be dried out and sealed, she departed for the downstream areas south of the Sirec: the Bayir gully connecting the Sirec and the Bec and the Bec and Ac Rivers. Specified areas were claimed by specified individual younger brothers. She then settled in the vicinity of present-day Biwar-on-sea, near the Omosmos River. So the story considers Biwar the centre of the entire Asmat world north of the Casuarinen coast.

On the sands of the seashore of Biwar-on-sea, Cowoc-Biwar planted various jungle fruits and roots and two coconut palms. She hung her carrying bag on her spear, which grew into a huge ironwood tree (it fell down, but a new one emerged and is still there; the area near this tree is sacred). She continued her journey by travelling to a river near Ac. There, without having sexual intercourse, she gave birth to a rattan liana (Zegwaard version), an *amber* snake, a flying fox, and a *yuwur* tree for making canoes. She cut up the snake and divided it among the people she had settled on the various rivers, together with spears, bows and arrows. Specified brothers, among them Acakap (at Ac), received head, tail and gall respectively. Their descendants will therefore be *yokmen*, courageous and destructive like the teeth of the *amber* snake. Headmen of five specified settlements refused to take a portion

of the snake. Hence their offspring lacked fighting spirit and were therefore doomed to die off or be forced to join other villages (1979 version). According to the 1954 version, she also gave birth to a sawfish (*ar*) in the Ac area. Hence the ferocity of the Ac fighters, matching the destructiveness of sawfish teeth. One day Acakap discovered people downstream harvesting *nipah* nuts. He quietly came up to them and killed a specified man, belonging to the Sogoni people (at present living upstream on the Bec River). The phrasing signifies headhunting. The next day the Sogoni people killed Acakap. They cut off his hands and raised them on a spear across the river of Acakap's people. When Cowoc-Biwar recognized the hands, she shouted to the Sogoni people that they were free to consume the flesh and have a feast, on the condition that Acakap's genitals (usually not eaten) be placed on the tip of an arrow on the riverbank. She put the genitals in her carrying bag, which is still in the care of specified descendants of Ac (Offenberg and Pouwer 2002:253), as an heirloom (*eram ese*), a centre of sacred power. After establishing other villages, such as Ayam, she settled with her husband near present-day Biwar-on-sea. There she built her own hut and a bachelors' house. According to the 1954 version, she did not wear the usual apron of sago-leaf fibre (*auwer*), but wore a star-shaped disc (*mbiwamun*) with an opening in the middle through which she urinated. With this disc and the corresponding shaft (*nao onak*, 'killing stick') she terrified her enemies, said to be the bird people who lived in hollow trees upstream on the Omosmos River. She was merciless and aggressive and so are her descendants: they are proud of their nickname 'the snakes'. However, she and her people soon travelled further south. Killing people of specified settlements along the way, she headed towards Safan, the underworld beyond the Casuarinen coast. There she settled for good. [The narrative mentions names of villages which remind me of the Wildeman River (Watiwamen) and Kepi (Kopa), the administrative centre of the Mappi district. From there, colonial officials and missionaries made exploratory trips into the Asmat region.]

The 1954 version presents a different, viri-centric interpretation of the end. After returning from the coastal settlement to her residence upstream on the Sor River, Cowoc-Biwar noticed that her brothers had meanwhile turned into autonomous leaders. They were no longer prepared to accept her authority. A quarrel broke out; the brothers joined forces and killed her, her husband and her father.

It is evident from the two versions of the narrative that Cowoc-Biwar was not only an imposing woman; she was also an extraordinary person, both a man and a woman. The 1954 version gives some fascinating details that confirm her double gender. Children of the woman's brothers, who are her classificatory children, came across suckers of the liana to which she gave birth. Since these suckers blocked the Bayir gully, her 'children' had to cut them away. However, they only cut the right-hand side of the suckers and left

the left-hand side untouched, because they were born out of Cowoc-Biwar. Some *un pa*, sturdy roots of a mangrove tree, also blocked the gully. This time the left-hand side was cut away and the right-hand side left untouched. The Kamoro consider the superior right half of the human body to belong to the mother, and the inferior left half to the father. Theirs is a matri-oriented system of descent. Apparently the Asmat have similar beliefs, but then reversed, in keeping with their patri-oriented system of descent. I take it that the left part of Cowoc-Biwar, corresponding with the soft liana suckers, is ascribed to her mother and to the female side. The right part of her body, however, corresponding to the sturdy roots of the mangrove, is ascribed to her father and to the male side. Her double nature is repeated in her offspring, hence the saving of the left-hand (mother's/female) side of the liana and the right-hand (father's/male) side of the mangrove roots. The male aspect of her personality is evident from the star-shaped disc cover for her genitals. The disc, placed on a shaft, was used by her and by men as a club in brawls and wars. The Kamoro also had similar clubs.³ Her disc is said to be still there, as an heirloom in the care of Biwar-on-sea. Surprisingly, people asked Sowada if he would like to see it. Pirimbu showed it to him in 1979, on condition that he would not insist on purchasing it.

The narrator, Pirimbu, solemnly placed an aged carrying bag, closed at the top with a bone pin, on a mat in the centre of the [bachelors'] house. He proceeded to open the bag slowly, and cautiously removed the object inside, which was attached to a cord. To my surprise it was a deep black star axe, with a hole in its centre. As he placed the axe gently on the mat, I admired it, explaining that I had never seen an axe so beautiful. I made a motion to pick it up, but a hand stopped me. An elder explained that the object could not be turned about or turned over indiscriminately, since it was sacred. They went on to explain that Tjawotsj-Biwar wore the axe beneath the genitals. One of its prongs stuck out, making her appear like a man to other people. The area of the axe's hole was liberally covered with *waseh*, the red paint made from burnt mud. There were mud spots on one of its prongs and I asked their significance. The people explained that whenever anyone dies, as had happened the previous day, mud is placed on the axe. Then, as we were discussing the axe, one of the elders got up, pointed to the hole in the axe, and excitedly explained that the opening represented the opening from which pigs, crocodiles, other animals, and men, too, were born. [Compare with the 1954 version, which has it that the woman urinated through the opening in the disc.] [...] I asked whether, at one time, they had used the axe in warfare or for opening the skulls of enemies in order to extract the brains [Sowada apparently mistakes the club's disc for an axe.] Surprised at the question, they stressed that its use in such a manner was forbidden. When I asked how the axe was obtained from Tjawotsj-Biwar and handed down through the generations, they said that this was the axe

³ For a description and illustrations, see Smidt 2003:86-7.

that Tjawotsj-Biwar had hung in a carrying bag on a spear on the Omosmos River. Later, the woman Darkau, while fishing on the Omosmos, had discovered the spear and the carrying bag in the jungle. It had been there for a long time, as the bag had deteriorated considerably and one of the axe prongs stuck out through the bottom. As Darkau did not know what the object was, she ran off to call her husband, Yuwus. She brought her husband to the spot. Yuwus, too, was puzzled. He carefully lifted the bag by the strap with a piece of wood. They took it into their hut. Yuwus, afraid of the object inside, attempted to remove it with wooden fire tongs, without success. Finally, Darkau pulled the axe out with her hand. At that moment they realized that the axe had belonged to Tjawotsj-Biwar, and that it was necessary and good for them to have it. To the people of Biwar Laut [Indonesian for 'sea'], the axe is proof of Tjawotsj-Biwar's existence and of her being the origin of the people. To this day, the axe is handed down through her relatives. (Sowada 1980b:68-9.)

This extraordinary field report by Sowada provides us with clear evidence that Cowoc-Biwar is considered the primeval Mother of the Human World, man himself included, at least as far as Biwar is concerned. She is the sacred 'lord of the land', she opened it up, furnished and allocated it. Her sacred heirloom-disc symbolizes fertility and virility, female and male genders. The disc in combination with the shaft is a powerful weapon that represents dominant male power. However, the constituents of the disc, namely the prongs and the hole, represent male gender and virility and female fertility, respectively. It may be concluded that the person and the emblem connote the ambivalence of gender and of male/female power. Compare this with Baicep, the huge anthropomorphic male/female sacred pig of the mountains, whose children are the male ancestors of the Bismam people, who are likewise dispersed (see Chapter VI). Note that their territory overlaps the territory claimed by the Biwar people, so that there are competing claims. The aggressive features of Baicep were also passed on to his/her descendants. He is believed to still protect and encourage his offspring by accompanying them wherever they go. With their paddles they create semicircular waves that are shaped like Baicep's tusks. Baicep will then make the waves bigger, so that enemy canoes have difficulties and capsize (Offenberg and Pouwer 2002:215). Naneu, his eldest son, afraid of being outstripped by his younger brother Ewer, shot a female being in the crown of a tree belonging to the bird people, a being said to be not human but crazy and dangerous for humans. Ever since, Naneu's male descendants are equally reckless when attacking an enemy (Offenberg and Pouwer 2002:213). Ewer earlier killed a turtle that turned out to be a local female guardian, called Buciwawuc. She exclaimed: 'Who are you? Why do those people from above come here to bother people from below? Because you have shot me, you may not stay here, but must settle on the coast.' The people cut her up, consumed her flesh, singed her hair and rubbed it over their head and shoulders [thereby identifying with the

victim, as in headhunting rituals]. Her emptied head was put in a bag as a sacred heirloom (Offenberg and Pouwer 2002:213).

Baicep and Cowoc-Biwar can be said to relate as *male/female* to *female/male*, and so do their competing descendants, the Bismam and Biwar peoples. The double and ambivalent gender is reflected in the ambilineal Asmat practice of appropriation of land, in the ideas and practices of war and headhunting, and in the ambilineal practice of descent, although patrilineal descent tends to predominate.

How do the Kamoro traditionally conceive of the Asmat? They used to call them *we manawe*, that is, people who are eaten by people, not people who eat people (*mana* means food/eating),⁴ yet they were feared for just this. The neighbouring Sempan were constantly on their guard. When somebody shouted '*We manawe*', people took to their heels; the term connoted terror.⁵ The denotation of cannibals is reflected in a narrative related to Zegwaard by Epepea of Iwaka (Kamora River, Central Mimika) and in an abbreviated version of it related to me by Tay, a well-known leader and storyteller of Keawkwa, Central Mimika (Zegwaard 1952:51-3; Offenberg and Pouwer 2002:195-7). The story deals with Manawe, said to live in an area east of the Sempan and west of the Asmat. Upstream is the Akimuka catchment area where the Nafuaripi live; downstream are the Miwar estuaries, situated west of the Sirec River near the border of the Asmat region. It is this area from which the great trek to the Mimika region is said to originate. The names of the terrifying culture heroes and giants Aoweyao and Mbiminareyao who set the trek in motion are associated with this area. The main theme of the narrative is a rebellion by children against their parents, with the former being punished by the latter.

Epepea's version of the story is as follows. The men and women of a Manawe settlement in the far east leave the village in order to catch fish and collect pile-worms in the downstream mangrove forest. They are unwilling to take their children with them, so they leave them behind in the care of a few elderly people. One of the boys, Minare [name derived from the Minar estuaries], is furious. He initiates a rebellion of all the boys and girls of the village. They board canoes and go upstream. An old mother's brother of Minare sympathizes with him and joins the party. En route the children grow up fast, as is usual for culture heroes. They build a longhouse. The mature, strong men divide the women of equally magnificent build among themselves. Some couples live upstream, some midstream, and some downstream in the longhouse; in short, it is a full-grown village.

Minare, having grown into a real giant, has his apartment at the end of the village on the riverside (as is appropriate for the leader of a settlement).

⁴ Zegwaard, cited in Pouwer 1955a:1.

⁵ Trenkenschuh 1970b:111, quoted by Van der Zee 2005:29.

When their parents return from fishing in the evening and call out for their children to receive their portion of pile-worms, there is no answer. Informed by the elderly people that the children have rebelled against them and gone upstream, the parents cry. Minare's parents prepare a bundle of fish and pile-worms to placate their son. They leave the village the following day to look for him. When they arrive at the longhouse in the early morning, the mother approaches his apartment cautiously. She whispers her son's name, but he shouts with a gruff voice: 'Who is there?' His frightened mother takes to the canoe. Minare's mother's 'brother' interferes. The parents are invited to the scene by Minare's [brand-new] bride-givers and then surrounded by the rebels, who threaten them with their lances. The parents ask their son for forgiveness. They are 'paid' for being frightened with a copious meal of wild game. The parents return to the village carrying a yardstick given to them, which indicates the height of their son and his age-mates and is meant as a challenge: 'We are grown up and married'. The people of the village respond to the challenge by preparing for war (*wiko*). When they approach the longhouse, they mistake the mother's brother of ordinary height for his sister's son Minare. They feel cheated, and launch an attack. Minare's mother's brother answers the challenge by shooting quite a few men. A canoe capsizes. Then Minare, thus far concealed behind the longhouse, comes into the open; people panic. He boards his canoe, advances towards them and, standing at the bow, shoots and kills all the men on his left-hand side, but saves the lives of the men on his right-hand side [Kamoro: mother's side, Asmat: father's side].

The losers, after a period of mourning, plan a counter-attack. A scabby old woman, the wife of one of them, attracted by the saga of the giant warlord, runs away and joins him by means of a ruse: she attracts him by imitating the call of a crown pigeon. Sitting in his canoe she offers him food, which he accepts grudgingly because he has noticed red entrails hanging from her vulva. However, after taking a shower she is reborn as a magnificent lady. He finds her under a mat. They embrace and she becomes his [second?] wife. The men of the village, further infuriated by the elopement, wage another war against Minare. After some heavy fighting, while moving to the bow, Minare does not notice a hole in the canoe. He falls through and gets stuck. His enemies take this opportunity to kill him. [An adversary of Aoweyao and Mbiminareyao meets his death in a similar way.] Accompanied by his weeping lover, they take his body to the village as a trophy and drop it on mats in front of his parents' hut. Then the bride-receivers, acting in reverse to the normal practice of caring for an affine, slice the body into pieces, which are then divided according to the rules of distributing flesh among relatives and affines. Even his father and mother receive their normal share. At night a boy asks his mother for water because the meat was very fatty. She goes outside to help herself to water. Meanwhile a female spirit (*mbi kapere*) takes her place

and offers water to the thirsty boy. When the real mother re-enters, she and her son realize what has happened. The female spirit, accompanied by another one, has bewitched the meat by blowing over it: 'This is our punishment, for you have killed Minare.' They bewitch the houses as well: these topple and sink into the earth.

Tay's shortened version offers a different interpretation: The parents and their rebellious children are not Manawe but Kamoro culture hero-ancestors (*amoko we*). They are not cannibals. Cannibalism arises from the bad conduct [Tay's personal comment] of Minare rebelling against his parents, a capital sin. Punishing him is correct in principle. When the children defeat the parents, the latter enlist the support of the Manawe (Asmat), the Naowapinera people originating from the parents' area later at Koperapoka basin, and the Tarya We of West Mimika. The giant Minare and his age-mates are then defeated. He is killed by a Manawe. It is the Manawe who chop Minare into three portions: they lop off his head and divide his body lengthwise into two. They give the left part of the torso to the people from below (that is, from the west), the Kamoro. They say: 'Eat it, it is nice and fat.' But the Kamoro say: 'No, that is not proper, not right.' They use the bones, sharpen them, and make spears from them. The Manawe eat all the meat, including the head. They take the women with them, as is usual after a headhunting raid.

So the two versions agree in that the leader of the revolt against the parents is killed and his body cut up. Note that the Kamoro term *wiko*, denoting the attack, refers to a brawl within the group or the federation. In this context killing, and even more so headhunting, is in principal prohibited. If killing does occur, indemnification is called for. *Wiko*, internal brawl, is opposed to *mokare*, war with people outside one's own group or federation. The corresponding Asmat distinction is between *owen* on one hand and *ndao mber* on the other. The latter term means headhunting, and can also mean a person whose head has been taken.⁶ In the first version the parents-in-a wider-sense are punished for their 'incestuous' cannibalism by female spirits. In the second version the enlightened, sophisticated village chief Tay ascribes cannibalism to the Asmat, not to the parents' group. The Kamoro merely prefer the bones to the flesh, an inversion of a Dutch saying, because human bones lend themselves better for daggers than cassowary bones. Tay's message is: We are civilized people, the Asmat are not. The two versions correspond in negating the conspicuous role of the severed head in Asmat myth, ritual and social life. In a comment on the Iwaka narrative, Zegwaard notes that, when the Asmat of Yoni were told the end of the Iwaka story, they were surprised to learn that the Kamoro are familiar with a story which they had assumed

⁶ See Voorhoeve 1965:342 under now; Van der Schoot 1969:42.

was known only to them. My guess is that, assuming that an Asmat version of the Iwaka story really exists – Zegwaard gives no evidence – it might serve to legitimize the Asmat norm not to raid nor to take heads of people or groups considered closely related or allied. However, political intrigues often circumvent the norms.⁷

The ritual

In this section I have rearranged the data provided by Zegwaard in his 1959 article in the *American Anthropologist* and in earlier typed drafts under a number of headings, so as to offer more systematic intelligibility: prelude, the raid, initiation. We concentrate on the ritual aspects. Zegwaard had ample opportunity to study headhunting practices on hundreds of occasions, since he was the first white man to take up residence at a time when Dutch colonial rule was not yet established there (Zegwaard 1959:1020). Raids, however, were relatively rare, as these require a good deal of ritual preparation and the well-planned organization of assistance by alliances. People preferred to avail themselves of opportunities that came to hand, which did not require preparation, such as treacherously killing guests or people who ventured too far from home. It often happened that visitors were cordially welcomed, even given presents, but later killed, preferably in their sleep. The protecting family acting as host was overruled by the majority of the settlement and humiliated. After one such occasion in Shuru, a hosting warlord and his group broke away and built a new bachelors' house at another spot.

Prelude

There are a variety of methods of ritual preparation. The very variety points to both the importance attached to a raid and the risks of waging it.

1. Simulation. It is believed that simulation of a raid ensures its success. A major type of simulation is the Firao Wu ceremony that opens the celebration of constructing a new men's house. Among the many sago palms – sometimes hundreds of them – cut down for the maturation of sago beetle grubs, there is an outstanding one impersonating an enemy. The 'enemy' is 'killed' by pig hunters – the strongest men – and hit with spears and daggers when 'he' falls down. While the lower part of the palm is sliced and provided with openings for the beetles to deposit their eggs,

⁷ For an example, see Van der Schoot 1969:41, as cited by Van der Zee 2005:105.

the upper part is opened carefully so that the body of young palm pith ending in a thick knob, *kus* (head), can be removed in its entirety. This is decorated with rattan and various types of leaves, and then carried in procession to the canoe on the shoulders of a number of enthusiastic men, to the accompaniment of a singing and dancing audience. The 'pith man' is placed in a vertical slumped position in the canoe on a number of cross-pieces (similar to handling the body of a slain man). On their way to the village the men sing the cloud song (see below) and the paddle song, as is usual when returning from a headhunting raid. There is bamboo-horn blowing and a loud reception in the village, where the oldest man asks: 'What have you brought?' And the reply of a senior man in the canoe is: 'We have killed a big man, he is lying in the canoe.' There is much yelling and throwing of lime. At dusk the 'pith man' is taken to the men's house and surrounded with chunks of sweet sago pith. His head is severed and his body cut up into chunks that are hurled in the direction of the senior men and consumed by them. At midnight the 'head' is consumed in secrecy by some of them (compare this with the secret consumption of sago grubs by senior men during Kamoro Kaware). A 'pith man' may also represent a deceased relative instead of an enemy. Father van Kessel reports from Basim that the 'head' of two 'pith men', named after the dead parents of the feast-giver, was fried and consumed by his bride-receivers (Van Kessel 1962:2). Evidently one does not eat one's 'own' head. According to Zegwaard's typed field notes on Firao Wu, this ceremony is also enacted as a preliminary to large fishing or pig-hunting parties. There is a clear analogy between the three Kamoro modes of simulating a successful pig hunt as described in Chapter IV on the one hand, and Asmat simulation of a man-hunt (or fishing and pig hunting, for that matter) on the other, but an equation of the Kamoro pig hunt with the Kamoro man-hunt, as suggested by Zegwaard (1959:1030), is not warranted by ethnographic evidence.

Simulation may also be performed by means of a graphical pantomime. A Shuru warlord imitated a woman preparing to pound sago and her male companion looking for his paddle, bow and arrows. He then enacted their departure for the sago woods. His men picked up the hint and laid an ambush near the Seper River. Shortly two men from Amberep arrived and were killed. Their wives, who had followed at some distance, managed to escape. Had the warlord only foreseen this arrival, or had his pantomime induced them to come along? The Shuru people are inclined to believe the latter (Zegwaard 1959:1035).

2. Evocation of or identification with the founding ancestor. In Shuru a pig hunt was organized on the eve of a headhunting raid. The pig was butch-

ered in an open space between the war canoes, lined up in two rows. The pig's head was offered to the leader of the raid. This evoked the presence and support of the mythical founder Baicep, an androgynous pig believed to join the raid and to cause a curved swelling of the water corresponding with his curved tusks; this turbulence of the water gets the enemy into trouble.

In Amberep one of the women dancing on the eve of a raid tied the head of a pig to her buttocks. The older men were supposed to comment that it would be better to have a dance with human heads, a clear allusion to the myth accounting for headhunting (Zegwaard 1959:1035). In Biwar the men sat around the sacred disc of their founding female ancestor. By moving their bellies in the direction of the disc while sighing, they evoked emulation of the courage of the ancestress, and of the ferocity of her serpent and sawfish offspring (Zegwaard 1959:1033). Were they emulating their birth?

Each founding ancestor left to his/her descendants sacred objects, kept in a bag, *eram ese*: tusks of a wild boar, a string of dog's teeth, the gall of some serpent, and so on. These objects or 'things to frighten with' (*omer pok*) are manipulated to scare the enemy and make him an easy prey (Zegwaard 1959:1033).

3. Enticing the enemy. On the occasion of the inauguration of a new men's house, the lower part of a thin 'magical' trunk (*eram asa*) is smeared with a particular mixture. Its ingredients and the kind of tree are known only to the performer. One of the ingredients seems to be cassowary fat. At night fires are solemnly built in the new fireplaces. One of the leaders holds the trunk in the fire. Its smoke has a penetrating smell. The wandering souls (*nam yipi*) of much feared enemies are conjured and invited to consume the smell. If such a soul, when roaming around while its owner is asleep, 'eats' the smell of the trunk, or the smell of roasted pig or some other food, this person is likely to be killed a few days later by the inhabitants of the 'hosting' village. This person's friends may be able to avert the disaster if they notice the wandering soul (Zegwaard 1959:1030). Similarly, a ball of sago and some sago grubs may be placed on a small platform in a river bend near an enemy's settlement. By uttering a spell while lifting the food in the enemy's direction and throwing some sago grubs in the river that drift towards the village, the souls of the enemy are enticed (by the smell of the food offered) to draw near. The bodies will follow shortly and can then be killed. This kind of enticing is called *fo fum*, meaning 'carried by the wind' (*fum*). The ceremony is performed by young males united in a joking relationship (*as akap*; compare Kamoro *akapa*) on the occasion of an *imu* (Kamoro: *imu*) play involving joking and jostling. This play confirms

the spiritual ties between boys and girls who have their spiritual name in common, given to them by a (usually female) medium (*namer ow*) shortly after they were born. This generates life-long ties of friendship between age-mates. On this occasion the age-mates offer sago grubs to their bride-receivers, but only after they have offered *fum* food to the enemy's souls (Zegwaard 1988a). In my view this ceremony commits young males to participate in warfare if need be. A similar ceremony is performed on the occasion of unveiling the carved memorial prow of a canoe named after someone who has been killed. The brothers-in-law of the deceased are then the performers. The platform is erected in the vicinity of the spot where their affine died. The food is offered to the spirit of the deceased, and is not meant for the enemy. It is even taken back, roasted and eaten by the brothers-in-law themselves. The carving is then revealed by removing the mat that covered it. By this token the brothers-in-law commit themselves to take revenge. The ceremony is considered a threat (Zegwaard 1959:1031).

The odour of the massive quantity of sago grubs thrown into the tube fashioned for the sago grub ritual on the occasion of the inauguration of a men's house (see Chapter IX) is also believed to attract the roaming souls of enemies (Zegwaard 1988a).

Finally, enemies are lured into an ambush with the collarbone of a turtle or with a forked bough, while the war leader beckons: 'Come this way.' In an opposite movement, sorcerers approach the village to be attacked on the eve of the raid and throw water in the direction of the enemy or blow water through a loophole (Zegwaard 1959:1034).

4. Augury. A dignitary smears his right hand with lime powder mixed with pulverized leaves; he rubs the hand faster and faster, so vigorously that blood trickles down: there is going to be bloodshed. The raid will be successful. In a shamanistic trance he takes his right hand in the left one and swings both hands through the air while moving up and down the men's house. Suddenly he runs at a man and makes a movement as if severing his head and slicing his body. He regains his senses by holding his hand in a fire (Zegwaard 1959:1035).

5. Psychological warfare. Implements of war such as arrows are placed in conspicuous places to intimidate the enemy. A favourite trick is spreading lies (*nao piri*), which is intended to confuse enemies and make them nervous. A go-between man is selected, for instance because his decapitation name originally belonged to someone in the enemy's village, or his mother originates from there, or because he is being given in ransom by the village concerned. All the men present rub his body with chewed sago; sometimes the sago is mixed with his blood. The man then departs for the

enemy's village to spread concocted rumours. For instance he makes them believe that his fellow men have left for a fishing party; this gives the prospective victims an opportunity to slyly gather sago on the territory of the people thought to be absent for fishing. These villagers are then attacked (Zegwaard 1959:1032).

All sorts of body ornaments such as red ochre, white chalk, black ash, bones and feathers, nose shells and other symbols of strength and courage, are meant for display as well as to frighten the enemy. These body decorations are armaments as much as ornaments. Consequently, they are banned when on friendly visits, as they invite trouble (Zegwaard 1959:1033).

Last but not least, there is the custom of bragging and boasting (*dewen atakam*) about the number of men or women a person has killed; he enumerates their names and the exact locations of killing. This is performed on various occasions, such as at the first stroke of the axe when carving an ancestor pole – Kamoro men then call out their mother's or grandmother's name – or when a sago-grub tube is opened, or when new warriors are inaugurated. Boasting is meant to impress and frighten visitors. Interestingly, bragging also occurs in awkward situations, when the braggers are not self-confident and do not feel at ease. While travelling on unknown rivers, for instance, at every tributary and also at whirlpools, which are thought to be entries to the underworld, men boast about their exploits. Even after death, the deceased is believed to tell hair-raising stories about his achievements in an attempt to frighten the dangerous spirits and to overcome his own fear. The potential danger of new situations, awkward experiences or encounters (such as meeting foreigners) is thought to be neutralized by boasting. The Kamoro speak of *kaypiri*, a new and potentially harmful situation (Zegwaard 1959:1031). When travelling by canoe to the far western part of Mimika, I noticed that my rowers, unfamiliar with the area, moved their paddles backwards, making the water splash: 'Kaypiri', they exclaimed. They tried to counteract the potential danger by behaving themselves contrary to ordinary behaviour – an analogy of abnormalities! Most interestingly, Kamoro *kaypiri* is the linguistic equivalent of Asmat *papish*, the ceremonial, strictly regulated swapping of wives for one night by *papish* friends, briefly referred to earlier (Offenberg and Pouwer 2002:237-41). The Asmat myth accounting for this institution deals explicitly with an unusual situation encountered on a fishing trip⁸ by Biwiripic [again] and his wife Kankani – a name connoting something unusual, strange, the realm of spirits – of Basim. They

⁸ For an example of this, see Offenberg and Pouwer 2002:201-4.

chase a fish with harpoons but in vain: the fish turns out to be a spirit. The spirit in the guise of a fish takes them to the underworld, where they are hosted by their deceased relatives. The different atmosphere, however, turns the female visitor into a seemingly dead one, and the male visitor seems to be close to death too. The woman is then revived by shaking her body. The relatives in the underworld attempt to restore her good health by administering succulent food. Alas, the food turns into shit, worms, and seawater. The sago flour rubbed on her forehead becomes as hard as clay. Under these circumstances, the couple have no choice but to return to earth, loaded with presents from their dead relatives. On their arrival back home, Biwiripic orders the villagers to make big fires with the explicit purpose of producing a lot of smoke. The couple arrive in a cloud of ashes and stand in the smoke, perspiring heavily. In this way the bad odours of the dead are purged, so as to prevent illness. The woman Kankani also initiates wife-swapping. Consequently, Biwiripic and the headman Fayit exchange wives, as a way of counteracting danger. Ever since, wife-swapping has been practised by Asmat in unusual, potentially dangerous situations, such as severe floods, thunderstorms, and encountering unfamiliar objects, such as gramophones and radios, as well as unfamiliar persons such as missionaries. This may very well be the first example worldwide of a case where the coming of missionaries led to wife-swapping.

The Asmat, as well as the Kamoro, 'steam' or 'smoke' people and their commodities when they return from a stay in foreign locations, as is the case when contract workers come home, or when a person returns from visiting a foreign ship. The Kamoro do not practise wife-swapping. There are indications that wife-swapping was imported via the Casuarinen coast from southern coastal Papua.⁹ Given the Asmat cultural focus on war and headhunting, it is understandable that wife-swapping bonds are mobilized to ward off danger particularly in interlocal political alliances made for the sake of warfare.¹⁰

6. Mobilizing commemoration and revenge. Shakespeare's 'The very dogs bark at me' is echoed in Asmat a thousand times by all sorts of objects named after the dead. In the event of killings, these objects, called *eco pok*, 'things that make great', connote revenge. The very walls, posts, roof beams, new canoes, houses, spears, shields, paddles, bags, strings of dog's teeth, even domestic dogs and pigs or a bundle of firewood cry for com-

⁹ Compare with Marind Anim otiv-bombari, regulated heterosexual promiscuity in similar situations of danger; see Knauff 1993:163-7, based on Van Baal 1966.

¹⁰ For an example I refer to the grounds for the political power of the warlord of Shuru Warsekome, discussed in Offenbergh and Pouwer 2002:236-41.

memoration and revenge (Zegwaard 1959:1029). Private and public property barks at you. These powerful reminders of revenge surround their addressees night and day. There is a parallel with the Kamoro naming of walls, posts, and shields as a commemoration of the dead (see Chapter II, Ema Kame), but the Asmat take it much further and explicitly use it as a means to mobilize revenge. Anything may serve this purpose. Van Kessel notes that in Basim the brother of a victim deposited a sago ball in the men's house: anyone eating from it would thereby commit himself to take revenge or punish a theft, as the case may be. Once an old woman took a bag of parched fruit, no longer fit for consumption, to a man. After enquiry, it turned out that she had filled the bag recently with fresh fruit as a reminder of the fact that men of Ocanep had murdered her child. The fruit was meant to stay there until her child's death was avenged. The man to whom she gave the bag managed to change her mind. She then left the bag with him to prevent the men of Basim from getting 'hot', that is, enraged (Van Kessel 1962:5).

The raid

A raid is normally launched shortly before daybreak. The party consists of three groups, namely the leaders, the seniors of the family; the archers, strong middle-aged men who have distinguished themselves on former occasions and who open the attack from a distance; and the spearmen, mainly young men who are being given the chance to prove themselves and gain renown. They form a semicircle at the back of the village and attack the frightened women and children who have fled to the woods. Men may put up a fight, but sometimes feign flight. The invaders therefore have every reason to strike quickly, for the fortunes of war can easily turn. After having taken their positions, one of the attackers makes a noise. From the houses some man will call: 'Who is that?' and the reply might for instance be: 'Your husband, Shuru.' Panic breaks out. The killing is irrespective of age and gender, unless specified beforehand. A man may keep a captured woman or child. Sometimes, in case of a shortage of women, abduction of women may be the sole objective of the raid. A young man who has cornered his victim may exclaim: 'Fathers, brothers, the women of our village never took any notice of me. I'll take this woman home', or, 'I want a dagger' (as proof of being a headhunter). As soon as a victim is overpowered, there is a wild outburst of joy (*kus yetet*); at the same time, this is a reaction to tense nerves. The victims are seized and generally ill-treated, their heads in particular being subject to torture: 'My head, my head won in the raid'. Except when raiders are in a hurry and the victims are killed on the spot and left there, the victims, dead or alive, are dragged to the canoes and placed in a sitting position on the bottom, their hands and chests

hanging over a pole. They are beheaded by especially skilled men at the confluence of rivers or at river bends, places where living spirits are found. It is imperative to know the names of the victims. These are sometimes found out by tricks beforehand (Zegwaard 1959:1034-50). On the way home the bamboo horn is blown. On arrival there is the usual enquiry, as described under the heading simulation. People jump and howl. The adorned, excited women cheer and dance and praise the killers (Zegwaard 1959:1022).

Shortly before the raid, and on return, the warriors sing the song of clouds. This song is said to have first been performed by the ancestors of the Bismam villages when they rowed from the mountains to the coast. The song begins by enumerating the large number of insane, deformed, malevolent and aggressive anthropomorphic and zoomorphic beings in the upper world: the misers, the roughnecks, the lizards, the thunder-men, the ant-men, the gnat-men, the wasp-men, the praying-mantis-men, the worm-men, in short all those creatures who 'harm us' (*mira fenaoo*, Zegwaard 1959:1034). Zegwaard notes that there is a striking resemblance to the underworld spirits that embitter the lives of the Kamoro, against which a ritual war is waged at the end of Kaware, when the *apoko* dignitaries thrust their lances into the sands of the beach (see Chapter III). In various Kamoro narratives malevolent rain, thunder, and storm beings, and black-cloud men or women in the upper world, function as the counterparts of the benign heroes of the sun. The enumeration of malevolent beings in the song of clouds signifies the risks encountered en route by the ancestors, and at the present time by their warrior descendants. The song continues, enumerating scores of trees that grow on buttress roots, grasses and reeds. It lists the spirits hiding in these places, from where they attack humans, making them ill and weak. The third part of this cosmological 'symphony' represents the turning point: it addresses one by one, separately, the companions, the 'brothers' of man, namely various kinds of parrots, the tree-kangaroo, and different kinds of squirrels. The headhunters feel a relationship with these fruit-eating beings (Zegwaard 1959:1034), similar to Kamoro's concept of *ipu enakoa*. The song is a male prerogative: it is repeated many times and is sung softly, so that the women and children sleeping in the family houses cannot hear it.

The prelude to the raid and the raid itself in its ritual context clearly demonstrate that commemoration and revenge of the dead is an all-out affair involving all walks of life and the entire cosmos. Headhunting provides us with a classical example of Marcel Mauss's total social fact. Small wonder, then, that Asmat art is so graphically anthropocentric. The initiation of male adolescents represents a momentous aspect of the commemoration and revenge of the dead.

The initiation

The initiation of male adolescents is the third stage in a series of transitions: from the invisible (*nat*) to the visible (*moro*) status of a 'soft' vulnerable human baby; from there to the status of a 'hard', less vulnerable, real human being (*kawenak*), a transition which takes six or seven years; and from there to puberty and adolescence.¹¹ It seems warranted to relate the first two stages to the third one as female to male. The invisible, spiritual status reflects, and not merely anticipates, the human status. Zegwaard gives details of two cases that demonstrate my point. One is about a young man from the settlement of Ayam who had served some years with the police corps in Kaokonao. He explained to Zegwaard in 1954 why he never ate bananas:

Before I was born as a human baby, I was a spirit-child. I was living with my spirit-parents in the woods. We were embodied in iguanas. One day they left me alone in the house. I got hungry and, although I knew that I should not take a banana from the bunch stored by my mother without her permission, I could not resist the temptation and ate one. Almost immediately I realized that my mother would be very angry. I got afraid and looked for a hiding place. I could not find a safe one. When the sun was already low I panicked, and no longer knew where I was. I heard voices and walked in the direction where the voices were coming from. I saw a young woman who was chopping wood. She was not a spirit female but a human female. I followed her into her house and hid in an attic where she stored her skirts. After taking a bath in the river, she took the spare skirt in which I happened to be hiding. To prevent discovery I had no other way but to enter her womb. [...] My mother, concerned that I had not returned home, followed my scent-trail to the village of the humans. There she contacted a female medium and told her that her boy might have entered the womb of a human mother. She wanted me back. However, the medium took the human side [as they usually do]: the woman gave birth to a baby after some months. That was me. The medium told my human parents about the stolen banana: 'You must keep the boy away from iguanas and never permit him to eat bananas.'

In the second story, an adult spirit-man who was living under big trees in the woods ate the sago grubs his wife had stored for a grub ritual. She burst into a rage and even gave him a public thrashing. Embarrassed, he ran away and entered the womb of a human female. The medium explained to the human mother what had happened. Ever since then, her son shared the name of his spirit counterpart, a name that literally means Red Eyes. This name reflects his craving for sago grubs. After that he was excused for his passion for sago grubs.

These stories illustrate that the society of spirits is thought to be equal to

¹¹ For a discussion of these stages, see Zegwaard 1989; see also Zegwaard n.y.f, from which I have selected my brief description.

human society, except for its invisibility. It includes both children and adults. The reason for leaving this society is typical of mythical and human realms: antisocial behaviour drives them out. The liminal transition from the society of spirits to human society is guarded by a human, usually a female medium. Zegwaard specifies ten such mediums residing in Shuru (1954), two of them males. Most of them are of middle age. There is a connection between them and specified men's houses. Each men's house in Shuru has two or three mediums. Three out of ten mediums are prominent. They receive messages exclusively by hearing, not through trance, hence cannot be called shamans in the current use of the word. Their contact-spirits produce a whistling sound, almost identical to the sound of the wind, *fa atakam*, literally wind language. The spirits come very close to the houses their agents live in. They come at irregular intervals, mostly on short visits. They recognize their agents by their body smell. Some spirits speak clearly; others can hardly be understood (this difference may be one reason for the difference in status of the mediums). The mediums' knowledge is exclusive; nobody can check on the truth. Each medium has his or her own spirits that they listen to. Zegwaard specified the spirits for each medium in Shuru. The majority of them are spirits of culture heroes or lords of the land, but one of them was the spirit of a baby which the medium lost in a miscarriage. The emergence of the spirits entering a woman's womb tends to coincide with the first visible signs of pregnancy and the movement of the foetus. As soon as the condition of a newly born baby permits, it is taken to a medium of the men's house or to any other medium chosen by the parents. The medium examines the baby very carefully. For instance, in the first case reported she told the parents that the baby's skin and fingers looked remarkably similar to the skin and 'fingers' of an iguana. The medium tells the parents how and why the spirit-child left its own sphere. From her diagnosis she derives a set of preventive guidelines and taboos. In addition, she contributes to the child's health by giving it a spirit name, *nat yuwus* or *namir yuwus*, referring to features and qualities of the culture hero that the medium communicates with. This name is strictly taboo. It is only divulged to a small circle of the closest relatives. It is used exclusively in the daytime, and even then only if it cannot be avoided. At night it is replaced by the name of the child's father. It is strictly forbidden to mention the name of the culture hero to whom the name refers, or his place of origin, in the presence of the child. If the baby falls ill it is renamed. The spirit name is the most essential animating element of the body and is for humans only. During the period of having 'soft' bones the child might feel a need to go back to its spirit realm, hence it is dealt with gently and carefully until its transformation to *kawenak*, a really human child. Children are then given a human or real name (*kawenak yuwus*), usually associated with a father or grandfather. The male children's 'female' spirit status decreases over the years, but never ceases to exist. A boy

only gradually advances to a male status, culminating in his initiation as an adolescent warrior.

A medium may give information about lost spirit-children, but may also receive and communicate messages about natural disasters, black magic practices, or the arrival of foreigners. In these respects a medium, though formally not having a high status, may yet have considerable informal power. Undoubtedly, the institution of spirit names highlights the position of the female gender. However, it operates in a socio-political context in which men have a big say. It is presumably no coincidence that two wives of Warsekomen, the powerful warlord of Shuru, were mediums. As Zegwaard puts it: 'Sjamanism and group politics are hand in glove'.¹²

The demarcation of the transition from the spirit world to the human world by a medium is not, or no longer, known among the Kamoro. There is a reminiscence of a medium's 'wind language' in the attempt of a male dignitary to get rid of the hovering scary spirit of a powerful man who was feared while alive. He is said to whistle while communicating with the spirit (see Chapter V). I also know of a male seer in West Mimika who was able to foretell the arrival of a feared pre-war police party by putting a maggot on his body near his heart, thus communicating with the spirit world. An acceleration of his heartbeat warned him of trouble.

Identifying with the dead: the first stage of male initiation

In Chapter III, I described how Kamoro initiates in the course of Kaware identify with the death and resurrection of the culture hero Mamirima (Asmat: Fumuripic). Asmat initiates do not; instead they identify with a slain enemy victim of headhunting – a conspicuous difference. Another telling difference is that for the Kamoro, initiation is the ceremonial duty of bride-receivers, whereas among the Asmat the initiate's mother's brother acts as the initiator. He immerses the decapitated head earmarked for the initiate in the river – often after a brawl about suitable candidates that sometimes involves snatching the victim's body. He then takes the head to the men's house and pins it to the floor near the fireplace with a dagger, so that it will dry. He makes a mat and fills it with magical twigs (*eram*). The initiate walks out of the men's house, the mat under his arms, boards a canoe, places the mat in the bottom, and acts as if he is returning to the place where the victim comes from. He then changes his mind and returns to the men's house after some water has been poured over his head [thereby identifying with the submerged head

¹² Zegwaard 1989, Zegwaard Archives, KDC, File 27:10.

of the victim]. He sits on the floor assuming the taboo pose of one who is ashamed: he lowers his head and does not look around. He perseveres in this pose for several days and takes no notice of the attempts of bystanders to divert his attention. Like newborn babies, he is subject to food taboos, such as not eating fish with bones in them. Meanwhile, his mother's oldest brother holds the decapitated head in the fire long enough to scorch part of the hair. In the afternoon or evening following the raid, he smears the ash of the victim's hair, mixed with the victim's blood, on the initiate's head, shoulders and body. In this way the initiate identifies with the victim. The initiate's body is painted with red ochre and his face with black and white stripes. His hair is lengthened with sago-leaf fibres. A piece of mother-of-pearl hangs on his forehead, and two tassels of cassowary feathers on the back of his head. A delicately open-worked pig bone is placed in his septum, and a triton shell on his abdomen. A crossed band is put across chest and shoulders, as in Mimika; bracelets woven of finely split rattan adorn his arms, wrists, calves, and ankles. A dagger is stuck into an armband, and a sago-fibre apron, otherwise worn only by married women, adorns his hips. A bamboo plate (*owam*), a sign of decapitation, dangles on his back.

Meanwhile, the mother's brother prepares the head. It is roasted and then kept in a loft during the night. The following morning the nose skin is taken off and the jaws are removed. The jawbone is thrown outside for anyone interested in using it as an ornament. The skin is torn off. The flames of a fire touch the temple and the back. A hole is cut into the head with an axe named after the victim. The brains are taken out and, mixed with sago, consumed about midnight, exclusively by the old men. Only the head is taken to the men's house. The flesh of the body has been distributed beforehand among relatives and friends. Even the women and children get their share; the initiate is absolutely excluded from the cannibalistic meal: he must not eat his alter ego. The inedible parts, such as eyeballs and genitals, are placed in the initiate's magic mat.

The head, painted and decorated with feathers and beads, is then laid between the spread legs of the initiate against his groin. He must look at it continuously. The head remains there for two or three days.

A few days afterwards everyone, dressed up, boards canoes. The initiate stands sullenly in a canoe, taking on the pose of a worn-out old man leaning heavily on a club-with-a-disc. His mother's brother supports him. The canoes, manned with drumming and singing villagers, move in the direction of the sea. The 'old man' becomes weaker and weaker and finally collapses. Together with the head, the initiate is immersed in the sea for a while; the victim with whom he is identified has then descended to the underworld of the dead. After the initiate has been hauled back from the sea, all his ornaments are removed and placed in his mat, never to be used again. The head is no longer

placed near the initiate, marking the end of the identification with the dead. The ceremony has reached its turning point. The old Adam is gone; his name-sake the initiate is reborn. Initially he acts like a child, does not know how to handle a paddle and has to learn the name of the river and its tributaries. His decapitation name (*nao yuwus*), transferred from the victim he replaces, is pronounced at every tributary.

The ritual recognition of adolescence

Back in the village, the initiate is decorated anew in the family house from head to toe; the bamboo plates covered with the dried nose skin of the victim, signifying a conquered head (there are three types of plates connoting a difference in ranking), switch from his back to his breast. All present sound a long drawn-out 'e-e-e-e-h'. Henceforth the initiate acts as a vigorous young man admired by all. After a few days of rest, the initiate's mother's brothers, in the presence of the whole community, assist in cutting down a sago palm and removing the bark. The initiate watches the scene together with the woman to whom he previously had handed the skull; she acts as a ritual mother. His mother's brothers plant a sago-leaf stalk near the middle of the trunk of the palm. By loosening the outer layer, except at the top and the bottom of the stalk, they can bend the middle part in such a way that an oblong hoop is formed. Then the ritual mother-with-the-skull swings a sago pounder through the hoop without touching the sago palm. She hands the sago pounder to her 'son', who repeats the act. The onlookers sing 'Sago pounder, sago pounder', followed by a song that was performed on the occasion of the preparation of the head. This ceremony re-enacts the following narrative told to Zegwaard (1959:1027-8) on another occasion: Biwiripic [again] goes with his wife and children to the mouth of the Fait River to pound sago. After felling a palm in full flower, he removes the bark from top to bottom. He orders his adolescent son to lie prostrate on the bare trunk. The father [or, according to some versions, the mother] swings a sago pounder and strikes the boy's neck. The boy's head, decorated with hair-lengthenings, lands upside-down in a tree. The father [or mother] strikes again and again, so that the blood and flesh of the son's smashed body entirely mix with the sago pith; the entrails splash high into the surrounding trees. Now the pith proves to be very easy to handle. The mother rejoices: 'Before, the sago was hard to knead and to wring out; now it is easy.' [Headhunting even literally permeates the sago.] The son's head begins to talk. He teaches his father the songs to be sung on the way from the raid, at the decapitation festivities, and so on. [Apparently, this is an alternative version of the myth which institutionalizes headhunting.]

After this ceremony everyone departs for pounding sago. The ritual mother and her 'son' exchange sago pith. The woman also prepares some sago in

the shape of a stick and gives a few pieces to the initiate. Other pieces are put in the magic mat. The initiate's mother's brother then decorates him again. The following night there is drumming and dancing in the men's house till daybreak. In the morning the initiate's hair is lengthened with curled sago-leaf fibres. He and the skull are decorated for the final ceremony on the following night. The skull is suspended in the centre of the men's house. At night a big fire is built in front of the house; singers and dancers sit around it in solemn silence. Then the initiate comes out of the men's house carrying the magic mat under his arm and the richly decorated skull. The men carry shields and move them towards and away from them, while a song is intoned. The dance begins. The initiate joins the dancing men; from now on, he is accepted by them as an adult. The songs performed during the preparation of the head and the sago pounding are repeated again and again. The dance, lasting till dawn, completes the Nao Pokmbu, the headhunting and initiation rituals.

Strikingly, an important part of the initiation of adolescent men aims at identifying the initiate with the victim of a raid. The great attention paid to the victim is in keeping with a general tendency, among both Kamoro and Asmat (a tendency also noticed by Zegwaard) not only to commemorate the dead but also, even particularly, to placate the dead. This is believed to be vital for the well-being of the living. It applies all the more to anyone killed in action.

There is also a most remarkable strategic side to ritual identification with the victim: it proves to be very useful in interlocal communication. Zegwaard (1959:1027) notes that the relatives of the murdered person, whenever they meet his namesake in the attacking party, will always call him by his assumed name. They will treat him as a relative, dance and sing for him, and give him presents. It is strictly forbidden to kill people from other villages who, because of their ritual names, are related to ego's village. A namesake (by virtue of this ritual) is often chosen as a go-between. On his tours Zegwaard frequently hired such namesakes to be his guides on his visits to tribes hostile to their community. Killing such people, although it happens occasionally, is considered a serious breach of convention. This Asmat practice seems to me a most interesting alternative to a rule practised in many parts of New Guinea, namely to marry those you wage war with. Asmat interlocal marriages outside affiliated settlements are rare. These two practices keep interlocal rivalries in check and promote interlocal trade and travel.

Finally, initiation of adolescent men is not the main significance of headhunting, although it may contribute to it. It is merely one aspect of headhunting, which functions as a 'totalizer' of Asmat society and culture.