Chapter xii

Conclusions

‘Similar yet different’ is a recurrent phrase in my comparison of Kamoro and Asmat. How are we to account for this paradox? As suggested by Knauft (1993), we can resort to the dialectic between the existential and symbolic dimensions of Kamoro and Asmat social formations, including their structural history. Structural history, as I see it, ‘happens’ on the borderline between chance events and non-chance structure. Structural history is structure on the move; it is ‘structuration’, a process of articulation and signification, which in Durkheim’s\(^1\) words is ceaselessly forming and breaking down.

Let us draw the threads together. The Kamoro (including Sempan) and the Asmat share as their habitat a vast, marshy coastal plain that widens, going from a small coastal zone and hinterland in the far northwest to a broad zone several hundreds of kilometres wide in the far southeast. This environment, in interaction with the activities of its inhabitants, gives rise to an ecological situation in which the carrying capacity of the land gradually increases from northwest to southeast. In keeping with this, the average size of settlements and their constituent groups, the Kamoro taparu and the Asmat yew, increases as we move from northwest to southeast. The largest settlements and groups are located about midway along the rivers east of Kaokonao, due to an optimal balance here between tidal and freshwater swamp. The settlements near the coast and those further upstream are somewhat smaller. These smaller Kamoro and Asmat settlements resemble each other, in that the number of their taparu and yew is considerably higher than that in the much larger settlements. Presumably the larger number of smaller social units is due to a larger dispersal of wild and semi-cultivated sago stands.

This ecological situation, which crosscuts ethnic boundaries, may be considered the common existential dimension of the Kamoro and Asmat social formations. It has important implications: the more manpower per settlement, the stronger their political and military potential. Consequently, it is no coincidence that in the larger Kamoro and Asmat settlements to the east, which tend to concentrate along the middle courses of rivers, competition for sago and

\(^1\) Durkheim 1900:190, as cited by Lévi-Strauss 1977:17.
fishing areas has resulted in more conflicts and warfare than in the smaller settlements further inland and near the coast.

So much for the similarities in the existential dimension of Kamoro and Asmat social formations. Their interaction with the symbolic dimension, however, shows a considerable difference in social formation and culture. Kamoro conflicts and wars lacked the virulence of Asmat warfare. Asmat warfare is inspired by a dominant orientation towards headhunting and an obsession with revenge. This is evident in the naming of all sorts of objects of daily use after victims of conflicts, as an incitement to take revenge. The tendency towards violence is also seen in the high rate of casualties and the large amount of settlements and groups wiped out, decimated, dispersed, or integrated elsewhere. I presume that the historical origins of headhunting must be sought east and southeast of the Asmat area. Take for instance the Yaqai of the Mappi area, described by Boelaars (1981). In Part Three of his monograph, which describes traditional headhunting practices, the author stresses the point that headhunting was a complex, highly differentiated phenomenon constituting the cultural focus of Yaqai society (Boelaars 1981:125-97).

The Kamoro, on the other hand, display an orientation towards the performance of an elaborate and sophisticated cycle of rituals. Headhunting has no place in this and has never been reported. It does not occur in myths either. Kamoro participants tend to engage in wars and conflicts by referring to the transgression of ritual secrets, even if the underlying cause may well be competition for sago and fishing areas. Violating ritual secrets is not reported as a cause of Asmat conflicts. However, it should be noted that a reported scarcity of sago groves may well function as social, emotional and symbolic, as well as economic causes of conflicts. Excessive ritual consumption of two crucial social goods, namely sago grubs and young sago-palm hearts, is a case in point. These delicacies are considered a source of spiritual power and fertility. Their production leads to massive felling of sago trees, and sometimes to overexploitation.

Most interestingly, in the far western part of Mimika a shortage of conventional natural resources, due to a limited hinterland and consequently limited manpower in small settlements, went together with strong and expansive political and military power. The lack of resources was made up for by exclusive access to and even a monopoly of Western and Indonesian commodities in high demand throughout Mimika. People from the east made risky journeys to Mimika in the far west to acquire iron tools, textile and ornaments. Here external history comes in. In the first quarter of the twentieth century there emerged in Kipia, West Mimika, a commercially-oriented Kamoro rajadom that participated in the slave trade (Pouwer 1955a:220-5); this rajadom was at least nominally Islamic. It affected, and in the long run might have changed, the traditional Kamoro cultural orientation, if not for the fact that
the Mission and the Dutch colonial government overruled the rajadom. It may be concluded that similar existential dimensions in dialectic interplay with symbolic dimensions and history can result in different social formations and cultural configurations.

The Kamoro and Asmat are similar in their multiple manifestations of dual organization and bipartition, which operate in both the existential and symbolic dimensions. Although the Kamoro differ from the Asmat in that their taparu are not divided into residentially separate, exogamic, intermarrying moieties as are the Asmat yew, about half of the settlements do consist of two taparu. The remainder consist of parishes having two or more taparu (Sempan yahe se) that, like the Asmat yew halves, relate to each other as downstream to upstream. Marriage within the settlement is dominant. Taparu of limited size are exogamous, while larger taparu/yahe se, such as in the Wania and Sempan regions, are non-exogamous. Adjacent settlements tend to be organized in pairs. We may conclude that the differences in actual dual organization between Asmat and Kamoro are a matter of scale rather than of principle. Many taparu are simply too small to allow for exogamic, intermarrying moieties.

Nearly perennial warfare has decimated or wiped out a good number of Asmat settlements or yew (Zegwaard 1977:18-25) and was a constant danger affecting social stability. In order to survive, individual or group remainders of the ravages of warfare were often forced to join other, stronger settlements or groups. Zegwaard repeatedly found that seemingly genuine yew are in fact fused ones which have absorbed the remains of other yew that were forced by violence and killing to submit to a stronger unit for the sake of survival (Zegwaard 1977:22). Dual organization, since it overrides ties of kinship and descent, and often operates through the individual power of yew or moiety warlords, acquires extra emphasis in the Asmat political sphere as a flexible instrument of survival and power. In contrast, Kamoro dual organization and bipartition holds sway over the symbolic dimension, due to a central orientation towards the cycle of rituals. Bipartition in these rituals is of vital importance for Kamoro ritual, more so than for Asmat ritual.

Kinship and marriage obviously operate in both the existential and the symbolic dimensions. The Kamoro and Asmat types of kinship and descent are roughly similar in their emphasis on ‘horizontal’, generational ties – witness the Kamoro generational category of peraeko and the Asmat counterpart of afayis cokom in combination with the pivotal ‘brothers’, ofew. Consequently, the ‘vertical’ line of descent is shallow and not well known; it may be better described as cumulative filiation. A residential override in combination with interlocal and even local fragmentation, rather than segmentation of constituent units, renders thorough genealogical knowledge superfluous. It is likely that the Asmat trend towards patrifiliation is related to the central symbolic
orientation towards warfare, headhunting and virility. The Kamoro tendency towards matrifiliation may be connected with a strong emphasis on (female) fertility in the symbolic dimension and on women’s powerful position in the food quest, acknowledged by men. Kaware is a male stronghold vis-à-vis the power of women in everyday practice. Women as workforce and as the source of offspring and alliances are a highly valuable ‘commodity’. Bride-receivers are therefore obliged to render a wide variety of economic and ritual services; matri-uxorilocal marriage fits in with this pattern. In their turn the preponderant position of Asmat ‘brothers’ corresponds with their living together around one ‘door’ in the men’s house. Consequently, Asmat marriage tends towards patrilocality and virilocality. The subservient role of bride-receivers, though, is less pronounced. Kamoro women have a higher status and a more powerful position than their Asmat counterparts. Papish, Asmat ritual-ceremonial wife-swapping in situations of socio-political or cosmological danger, is not practised by the Kamoro. However, its Kamoro linguistic and cosmological equivalent kayakiri also denotes a situation of cosmological danger, such as travelling through unknown territory or being immersed in a foreign world as a contract labourer in the city. It is characteristic of the Asmat central orientation towards revenge and war that Asmat warlords use wife-swapping not only for counteracting cosmological danger, but also as a strategy for enlisting the support of or remunerating allies. They talk their wives into accepting this role. Wife-swapping as a strategy is not mentioned in the myth accounting for papish. (It should be noted that papish is strictly regulated. Transgression of the rules leads to conflicts and fights.)

Kamoro and Asmat cosmology is by and large similar. Humans live in a world in between the upper and the lower world. From this ‘crossover’, superhuman tricksters ‘furnish’ the earth with goodies acquired from above and below. The entrance to these abodes is paved by antisocial behaviour. Good and bad are complementary. Their human descendants likewise manipulate cosmological forces. There is a difference, though. I would venture the suggestion that such manipulation in cosmology-based ritual varies according to the main cultural orientation. For instance, in the course of Kamoro Mirimu Kame – the initiation of young people – as well as on other occasions, the names of the sago areas are recited one by one with a view to manipulation. The male sago dignitaries state that there is sago, not just that there should be sago: it is a coercive act. They also summon two female sago dignitaries and the sun: ‘Sun, shine upon the mature sago palms [that is, fill them with pith], and let all areas [as specified] be replete with palms.’ A reverent attitude of prayer is nonexistent. The male and the female sago dignitaries stride past the houses and shoot arrows made of sago ribs by way of symbolic exhortation to the sago spirits to do their job and fill the sago trees. Immediately prior to the nose-piercing ceremony, the specified course of the rising sun is recited in
a series of ritual statements, accompanied by a staccato of striking gestures and passes by special dancers. This reaches its climax in shooting burning arrows in the direction of the sun to emphasize and support the sunrise. No mistake in the songs should be made, lest the sun not rise. The impressive sun ceremony is part of other rituals as well, such as the bat dance, as a highlight of Ema Kame. These and other ritual activities are meant to evoke the elements and forces of cosmology to promote fertility and growth. The Asmat attempt to ensure a successful raid by forcefully singing and repeating the cloud song. The malevolent beings of the upper world and of the earthly forest are exorcized by naming them one by one. The animal ‘brothers’ of man are similarly invoked.

Kamoro and Asmat narratives agree in locating the origin of Ema Kame/Emak Cem in the hinterland. I venture the suggestion that in long-term history the present Kamoro, the Sempan, and the Nafuaripi had ancestors in common. Linguistic evidence seems to support this conjecture. Their main locations were upstream, in the hinterland. Ema Kame/Emak Cem is likely to have originated from them. In this respect it is noteworthy that the architecture of the Kamoro Ema Kame ceremonial house differs from all other ceremonial houses, including the Asmat ones. And it is perhaps no coincidence that in the Ema Kame/Kiawa of the Kamoro/Sempan a canoe as ceremonial object is absent, whereas it is a dominant, possibly pre-existent or coexistent, symbol in the Emak Cem of the Asmat.

Then, the more recent migrations of coastal-oriented communities from the far eastern part of Mimika, set in motion by attacks by peoples bordering on or living in the present Asmat territory, clashed with or merged with the pre-existing, inland-oriented communities. These migrants gradually moved to the present Kamoro territory, where they settled as far as Etna Bay in the far western part of Mimika. They might have adopted Ema Kame from their inland-oriented predecessors. Ema Kame is universal in Mimika and was added to their coastal Kaware and nose-piercing rituals. The story of their migration has it that some migrants retraced their steps to collect the pin (amupao) for nose piercing in the far eastern Koperapoka coastal area, where they had left it behind when they panicked and fled. A myth about the introduction of nose piercing locates it in Mimika far to the east (Zegwaard 1952:47-8).

Descendants of the original inland-oriented people, who did not mix with the coastal invaders, retreated further inland, and are the present-day Nafuaripi. They do not celebrate Kaware, nor do the closely related Sempan. The inland- and upstream-oriented factions of Asmat, whose ancestors are believed to have migrated long ago from areas east and northeast of their present habitat, presumably also adopted Ema Kame/Emak Cem from these Nafuaripi. The latter retreated to the headwaters because of attacks by the far more powerful Asmat invaders. The coastal Asmat do not celebrate Emak
Cem, but there has been some recent diffusion of it downstream.

In view of these intricate vagaries of history and migrations, it is all the more striking that all myths related to Ema Kame/Emak Cem, in spite of their diversity, are similar in eliciting the paradox of human genesis: born out of one, yet born from two. These myths also have in common that they ascribe physical genesis to the female gender and social genesis, the genesis of different groups, to the male gender.

Ema Kame/Emak Cem demarcates, at least among the Kamoro, the final stage and climax in a gradual, ritually demarcated process of commemoration of the dead. In the end, their bones are abandoned in the ceremonial house and left to decay. For both the Kamoro and the Asmat, Ema Kame/Emak Cem is a rite of passage from the living to the dead and vice versa, and from adolescence to maturity. The transition to adult status is marked literally by scarification. Ema Kame/Emak Cem celebrates and promotes fertility and growth, and is therefore classified as female, and as the source of physical reproduction.

There is a difference, though. Kamoro Ema Kame displays a plethora of rituals and ritual objects expressing a female-centred and matri-centred orientation. One of its highlights, if not the main one, is the simulation of birth from the vagina/navel of the ancestral mother, represented by a sacred board in the centre of the ceremonial house, one out of two (puru mane) symbolizing the ancestral couple. The very elaboration of a matri-centred complex of narratives and rituals points to Ema Kame as an age-old institution. One of my key informants even rated Ema Kame as the mother of all rituals. Asmat Emak Cem is less elaborate and a matri-centred complex is missing. The sacred boards are there, but they function merely as a deterrent. Emak Cem’s central symbol is the spectacular spirit canoe (uramun or wuramun), which is similar in name to puru mane, yet quite different in substance and meaning. It is a magnificent piece of craftsmanship. Together with its associated ritual it is a perfect symbol of the life cycle: the honoured dead are invited to depart with the canoe to their abode in the underworld, while the initiates are marked as their successors by scarifications applied to shoulder, back and buttock. This happens in or in the vicinity of the ceremonial canoe. The marriageable ones among them are marked a second time by scarifications of the chest, which are applied in the same manner to the chests of their younger sisters. This scarification marks brother and sister as the basic pair for social exchange. So patri-filiation, patri-descent and marriage, the basic mechanisms of social continuity, are literally carved out in a ‘female’ ritual. The origin of Emak Cem is ascribed to two sisters who not only devise the ritual but also participate in it.

For the Asmat, canoes together with war shields (yamesh) are important components of their cultural complex of warfare, their ‘male’-centred orientation. The making of war shields is even the subject of a special ritual. It is striking that for the Kamoro, shields are components of ‘female’ Ema Kame,
but as strictly ceremonial objects (yamate) only, without a grip. Each of these shields represents a male or female person who has passed away and is honoured during the ritual. Special shields represent the ancestors and their per-aeko descendants. Ceremonial shields are not a part of Asmat Emak Cem. So Ema Kame and Emak Cem are similar in some respects, yet the rituals differ in orientation.

Yipae, the fascinating ‘female’ Asmat masquerade impersonating and honouring selected dead persons, is strikingly similar in this respect to the Kamoro masquerade during the spirit platform ritual. However, the number of masked performers usually exceeds the two of the Kamoro masquerade. Seven have been reported in one case, but the number two does come in, since the dead to be honoured as well as their performers are chosen by the moieties. Of more importance is the difference in purpose. Yipae is meant not only to honour the dead but also to replace them. Relatives of the deceased adopt the performers of the masquerade and a good number of their relatives as well. The adoption is marked by the adoptees being provided with a bracelet. Scores of bracelets are involved. The adoptees identify with the deceased by adopting the name of the deceased. In this way, persons of different family groups are knitted together and the loss of relatives by death is made up for. Yipae has a strong socializing effect, comparable with the effect of Emak Cem ceremonies. It is enhanced by a massive exchange of food. Its intention is clearly revealed by the constituting narrative. An orphan who is not looked after very well helps himself to food by donning a fun mask to scare women and men returning from collecting sago and fish. Terrified, they leave the food behind. When the men find out, they not only decide to remedy the evil of neglect, but also are induced by the orphan’s ruse to start the real masquerade, this time using sacred masks. During the ceremony a masquerade impersonating the orphan and bringing about a lot of commotion and fun precedes the masquerade impersonating the dead. Imu joking adds to a relaxed atmosphere. Making up for the dead is an important feature in view of the high rate of casualties through warfare and headhunting. It is absent in the Kamoro masquerade. Further, the Kamoro masks are donned by bride-receivers, not by relatives. This would be improper in the Asmat case: one should not mingle affines with kin by means of adoption. Although armbands are also donned in the course of the Kamoro masquerade, this is done by bride-receivers of the deceased. They collect food delicacies to give to close relatives of the deceased in order to alleviate their sorrow. Again, a difference in cultural orientation, in spite of superficial similarities, is associated with a difference in deeper meaning.

The complex relation of ‘male’ Kamoro Kaware to Asmat Yew Mbu/Tow Mbu rituals was discussed in detail in Chapter IX. Here it suffices to reiterate some conclusions. The rituals have two founding myths in common, though in varying versions. A third Kamoro myth, about the culture hero Nokoro,
is not shared, but an important part of its subject matter, namely the sago grub ritual, is. However, the form and aims of these rituals vary. Interestingly, Nokoro’s canoe, serving as a container for massive quantities of sago grubs, turns up among the Asmat in the form of four cylindrical logs, either interconnected with a mat or used separately. Both serve as containers of sago grubs coming down through a tube.

However, the orientation and focus of the rituals differ markedly. The concern of the Asmat ritual initiation of a new men’s house is the promotion of communal strength and solidarity, explicitly including the relation between the sexes. Their chief culture hero is Yenip-from-above (the earth). His exploits are dramatized in the ritual. He is credited with the conversion of small dispersed and self-seeking bands into a large powerful community, enjoying access to abundant natural resources and the pleasure of a rich social and cultural life. Ritual collecting of large quantities of sago grubs and their distribution express and promote cross-gender strength. There is a mock enactment of warfare by males and females separately. The exploits of Fumuripic, the culture hero of resurrection, are not dramatized but are commemorated in song.

For the Kamoro, on the other hand, Kaware marks not the solidarity but the opposition between the sexes. Further, it is not the myth about the Kamoro version of Asmat Yenip that is depicted in the ritual, but rather the narrative about the culture hero of resurrection. Nokoro, the culture hero of the third myth, is also impersonated. He exhorts women not to neglect the men but to take good care of them. Finally, the violent death of the hero of resurrection is avenged in ritual by thrusting lances into the sand during the grandiose final act of Kaware, thereby crushing the evil spirits. Kaware is a male stronghold rather than an expression of cross-gender solidarity. Again, in spite of similarities, the difference in main orientation shows up.

Finally, the Asmat Mbish ritual, considered in the context of the ritual of warfare and headhunting that it was formerly part of, is the ‘male’ coastal counterpart of ‘female’ inland Emak Cem. Both rituals combine a commemoration of the dead embodied in a spirit pole and a spirit dugout – a vertical and a horizontal canoe, respectively – with initiation. Initiation in Emak Cem involves the recognition and participation of both males and females as adults in everyday social life, based on kinship, marriage and cumulative (patri)filiation. This aspect of social life relates as ‘female’ to the ‘male’ aspect of warfare and headhunting. The initiation and social acceptance of male adolescents in the ‘male’ sphere of social life is ritually demarcated by presenting the initiate with the skull of a slain enemy. The initiate is expected to identify with the victim; he even adopts his name. Nose piercing has no place in this. This initiation is explicitly associated with warfare and headhunting, and so is the spirit pole. The tree selected for making it is even attacked as if it were an enemy. Its transportation and arrival in the settlement are marked by a mock
war between moieties and between all the men and the women. The women are assembled in the men's house: they function as the enemy. The blood of the victim or victims of headhunting is applied to the eyes, mouth and genitals of the carved figures. It is this act which vitalizes the carvings and gives them their power.

The ‘female’ side of the Kamoro initiation of young males as performed in Ema Kame is similar to the Asmat one, but more elaborate. It marks their passage to the social life of adults in terms of kinship, marriage and (matri) filiation in the same way. However, the ‘male’ aspect of initiation as apparent in nose piercing during Mirimu Kame differs from the Asmat one. It is connected not with warfare but rather with fertility and growth, with cosmology and its manipulation. Witness for instance the fact that it is performed on a sago scaffolding, a major symbol of growth. Also, the male aspect of initiation in Kaware is about ritual resurrection, not war.

Although the naming of Kamoro and Asmat spirit poles is identical and they both consist of three parts meant to commemorate the dead, there are significant differences in construction and meaning. The Kamoro tripartition of the mbitoro clearly corresponds with the tripartition of the cosmos. The central round or oval motif of the wing represents the may kame, literally ‘father’s house’, the house of the sun hero. Zigzag openwork carvings between the sun motif and the junction with the wing denote clouds, the transition between the sky and the earth. Marks (otepe) of cult groups to which particular ritual sequences are assigned are also carved in openwork on the wing. Then follows the depiction of humans represented by the hollow carvings of a specified deceased man and woman. The inner body (ndata) departs from the human body, leaving only the outer covering (kao). The point at the bottom as well as the hole in which it is inserted are puri (taboo), as they represent the transition to the underworld. Just beneath the point of the pole, the spirits of honoured deceased, called up by the songs, watch the festive events. The tripartition of the Asmat mbish does not explicitly correspond with the tripartition of the cosmos. Its top is not the wing but consists of the carving of a deceased man from which the wing protrudes. The wing consists of openwork spirals that denote unspecified ancestors. Anthropomorphic carvings denoting deceased children are also part of the wing (similar to Kamoro carvings of faces denoting children). The abode of the sun is not indicated. The carvings of the middle portion of the mbish correspond with those of the middle part of the mbitoro, but the bodies are not hollow and the arms, unlike the drawn-up ones on the mbitoro, hang down and point to the crotch, thereby referring to the scalp of a slain man placed between the knees of an initiate (Gerbrands 1967:310-1). The bottom part of the mbish is not inserted in the earth. It often ends in a reduced version of the spirit canoe or in an open niche in which other male but especially female ancestors are depicted with Kamoro-like bent knees. Asmat and
Kamoro have in common that the oval icons of living/moving, respectively *bianam* and *mopere*, are applied to the limbs. In Asmat carvings, however, scarifications of the limbs indicating muscles, which connote physical power, are predominant.

So our conclusion with respect to anthropomorphic carving is, again, that they are similar yet different. The Kamoro deeper meaning of tripartition of the spirit pole clearly reflects cosmology. The Asmat tripartition reflects ancestry.

Both Kamoro and Asmat culture agree in a strong predisposition towards, if not preoccupation with, a cult of the dead. The Kamoro take leave of the dead in a gradual series of eight stages, including the final stage of Ema Kame. This takes several years. Unfortunately, our knowledge of the Asmat stages of farewell from the dead is incomplete. However, it is quite clear that the Kamoro and the Asmat share a deep concern with the dead, since they believe that caring for the dead is essential for living, for survival. At the same time, their attitude towards the dead is deeply ambivalent. The dead are a basic component of everyday life. They are honoured and deeply respected, but also feared. The living constantly feel the need to remind the dead that they can handle life without them: ‘You were a good hunter, provider, fisherman, drummer, singer or storyteller, but we can manage perfectly well without you, thank you. Now please move on and leave us alone.’