

## CHAPTER II

### WARFARE

From the standpoint of any particular Kamoro-Asmat community, there is one other aspect of environment which must be taken into account. For any one community, other communities constitute an aspect of the environment to which there must be some sort of adjustment. Among the Asmat this adjustment has involved a state of intensive warfare. In most other Kamoro-Asmat regions, warfare is less important. In this chapter Asmat warfare will be discussed and compared with that of other groups of Kamoro-Asmat speakers, and an explanation for the high intensity of warfare among the Asmat will be advanced.

#### THE ASMAT

#### Aman-Namkaŋ

#### Weapons

The Asmat fight with bows and arrows, spears and shields, daggers, and, occasionally, clubs. The bows and arrows used in warfare do not differ from those used in hunting. The war spear, piw, is of light wood and has a wide, thin blade on the shaft about two feet from the point of the spear. This blade, which seems to have no utilitarian purpose, is about a foot long and four or five inches across. It is usually very elaborately carved with "arabesques." The shaft of the spear is often decorated with white or black feathers as well as further carved decorations. The spears range

around ten to twelve feet in length. Such spears are used only in ceremonies and warfare.

Asmat shields are five to six feet high and three to four feet wide, tapering toward the bottom. They are also made out of some light wood. The faces are carved with elaborate designs, often representing an abstract outline of a human figure, with a small representation of a head at the top. A ridge of wood with a handle hole runs vertically up the back. Similar shields are made in the course of ceremonial cycles.

Cassowary bone is commonly used to make daggers, ase pisua, used in warfare, village fights, and ritual "romps" between men and women in the ceremonial cycles. They are about a foot in length. More elaborate daggers, belonging to great warriors, are made of crocodile jaws, ew karowan, or human thigh bones, nanamak. The hilts of the latter two may be decorated with Job's tears, nek, and/or feathers attached to a fine net made of fum twine.

Clubs were apparently not too commonly used in Asmat warfare. Informants denied that the stone club-heads in their possession were used for this purpose. I have seen short hard wood clubs that were used, but when informants describe fighting, clubs are seldom mentioned. The digging stick, om, is of course used as a club in village fights, but it does not appear to have played very much part in true warfare.

### Methods of Fighting

Asmat warfare is not very "sporting" by Western conceptions. If representatives of two hostile villages meet, usually in canoes on the river, there are only displays of enmity if the two groups are at all evenly matched. Such displays involve the calling of epithets, usually implying that the enemy men are "women" or are "wives" of men of the other group. There may also be shooting of arrows into the air or water, or there may simply be threats with drawn bow. Lime is thrown at the opposing group. Lime is associated with a female element in the universe which makes men "hot," that is, brave and aggressive, so that throwing lime is really another way of calling the enemy female. After a certain amount of this behavior, both groups are very likely to withdraw in good order.

When the people of the enemy village are outnumbered, things get more serious. If they are on the river, they are likely to be chased to shore and dispatched, unless they can escape into the forest. Often, they are ambushed in the sago areas or at the fishing streams. Most victims are, in fact taken this way. For this reason, it used to be the case that an entire village or men's house group of a village would usually go to the sago or fishing areas together. Such an outing, jicap, provided protection for the entire group. Good warriors would remain in canoes up and downstream from the area where the group was working. They would give warn-

ing if the enemy approached. Other men accompanied the women into the forest to help with the work, but especially to protect them from ambushers. In doing all this, old people and young children were sometimes left without adequate protection in the village, where they were prey to surprise attacks.

One of the results of the enforced peace has been the breaking down of this community expedition pattern. People now feel free to go in small groups to the sago and fishing areas. Even now, this is not entirely without its risks. Sporadic cases of headhunting do still occur, and they are frequently a result of the fact that a lone person or couple presented too much of a temptation to a man from another village.

The community expeditions were also made beyond the recognized area belonging to a particular village. This was the principal means by which new territory was annexed. Naturally, such activities led to intense hostilities. There were even cases where the entire village moved, lock, stock, and barrel, to territory belonging to another village. Thus, perhaps twenty years ago, Aman-Namkaj made the experiment of moving briefly to the North Eilanden River, somewhere south of Jao-Sokor. This seems not to have been a very bright idea, for they lost many men in a sudden attack by the people of Jao-Sokor, and were forced to return to the Kampong River. Their most recent mass expedition was far upstream on the

Kampong River, as mentioned by Father Zewaard in the passage quoted in Appendix I.

Besides sporadic killings, there are also organized headhunting raids carried out by an entire men's house group, or an entire village. Such massive raiding expeditions often were associated with ceremonial cycles. Asmat ceremonial cycles almost always involve the making of objects named after recently deceased persons. When these persons were killed in warfare, the ceremonial cycle calls for a revenge expedition against the offending village. Aside from this, certain ceremonial cycles simply call for a headhunting expedition. This is particularly the case with the Mis ceremonial cycle, which involves the making of large poles, and the Owerces ceremonial cycle, which centers around the initiation of bachelors into manhood.

The night before a headhunting raid, the men of the men's house group gather in the men's house. There, plans are made for the raid by the leaders of the group. A leading "shaman," namer ipic, may consult the spirits and ask them for aid, whistling their replies under his breath.

The raid usually takes place in the early morning, before daybreak, though there are cases in which a village is attacked in broad daylight by a line of canoes bearing swiftly and directly down on the village. In any case, the element of surprise is all important, for it represents the major advantage of the attackers. If possible, the village is surrounded, with warriors armed with spears standing at the back

of the village to dispatch any inhabitants who attempt to flee. The village is attacked from the front by archers, who are then followed by younger men with spears and shields. The latter do most of the close-in fighting. The eldest men stay on the sidelines, directing tactics during the earlier, more organized, part of the raid.

Sometimes a woman or child is spared, to be taken back to the village. A woman is occasionally raped, in which case it is prohibited to kill her. Usually, though, the still living victims are carried to the canoes and tied upright with their arms hanging over a pole. Asmat informants delight in demonstrating this position.

The victims, still living for the most part, are beheaded at sacred spots along the rivers on the way home, or they may be beheaded near the village. The beheaders of the victims are sometimes the wives of the headhunters. This is one way in which a great warrior, tesumajipic, enables his wife also to become tesumaj, great.

The warriors return to the village blowing on their horns to announce their victories. Someone from the shore calls out "Who do you have there?" The headhunters reply, "A big man," or "A big woman," as the case may be. The bodies are dragged on shore and cut up. Some of the flesh is immediately distributed, the rest may be taken to the men's house. The head itself is speared from the neck to the mouth with a dagger and is rushed into the men's house to be pinned to the floor in front of the central fireplace.

It is remarkable that with this intensity of warfare there was nevertheless a good deal of inter-village visiting. This was made possible by the fact that inter-village marriages do occur, and that affines and relatives protect visitors from other villages. In addition, men who have received headhunting names from a particular village are in principle free to go to that village without fear of danger (Zegwaard 1959:1027). Finally, various kinds of peace-making rites establish temporary peace between villages. These tenuous bonds make a degree of inter-village contact and trade possible. But an individual is always likely to misjudge his safety in a village, often through a miscalculation of the power of those obligated to protect him. Under the circumstances, I would certainly not make visits to other villages if I were an Asmat. Father Zegwaard (personal communication) has suggested to me that there is an element of display of courage and dare-deviltry in most inter-village visits. I think that he is right.

#### The Headhunting Ceremonial Cycle

During the days following the taking of a head the Now ceremonial cycle is carried out. An extended discussion of this ceremonial cycle belongs in the context of a discussion of Asmat ceremonial cycles in general, for it closely parallels the others. Briefly, in a series of rituals which clearly embody notions of death and rebirth, the name of the victim is given to a young boy who is a son, nephew, or

younger cousin of the warrior who killed him. This head name, now juas, belongs to its recipient for life, and when he visits the village of the man whose name he has received, he is treated by that man's relatives as close kin. The head itself is returned to the warrior, who adds it to his string of skulls, which hangs before his house or before his fireplace in the men's house as a sign of the prowess of its owner.

#### Motivation

Zegwaard (1959:1037) advances four important factors which supply motivation for Asmat headhunting practices: (1) the cosmology of the Asmat, (2) the need for prestige on the part of Asmat men, the desire for fame and the desire to impress the women of the village, (3) fear of the spirits, and (4) economic demand. I agree. The Asmat believe that the universe is within the skull of a deity, Nesoipic or Mujsejpic, with whose demise the universe came into being. Every instance of head-taking is thus essentially human sacrifice and a recapitulation of the condition by which the universe exists.

Nor is there any doubt that from the standpoint of the individual warrior headhunting is a sine qua non for prestige and leadership within the community. Other activities, hunting, carving, chanting, and so forth, contribute somewhat to a man's prestige in the community, but all important leaders are, or have been, great warriors. The relationship between



prowess in warfare and community leadership will be discussed further in later chapters.

It is also certain that the desire to revenge and appease the dead is an extremely important factor in Asmat warfare, which accounts in part for long-standing special enmity between particular villages. Often, headhunting is not motivated by anything more than revenge.

The last headhunt, in about 1956, of the village of Aman-Namkaj is an example of this sort of warfare. A husband and wife of Namkaj men's house group went fishing on the South Eilanden River where they were attacked by men from the village of Atamut. The husband escaped, but his wife was killed. In reponse, Aman-Namkaj staged a massive raid on Atamut in which over twenty heads were taken. At least from the standpoint of Aman-Namkaj, there was no question of economic rights involved in this case. The matter may conceivably have looked different to the people of Atamut.

Another, rather peculiar, case involved the village of Ac-Jasiw. A man of the Awok men's house group in Aman-Namkaj was "ashamed" because the wife of his bond friend rejected him in papis wife exchange. In a fit of deep "shame," namke, he dressed in all his finery, took several axes, and paddled to the men's house of the Jasiw group. There he sat down, placing his axes beside him. The people of Jasiw might have given him food, in which case the matter would have been

closed. Instead, one of the Jasiw men collected the axes and stabbed him in the belly with a kamem fish spear. Then both men walked into the forest, away from the village, followed by many people. In the forest, he was speared in the back by the Jasiw man and killed. The killer cut off his head and carried it back to the men's house where it was used in a headhunting ceremony. The flesh was divided and eaten.

This is a normal procedure for suicide. The only other method is that of standing firm and fighting when attacked by an overwhelming enemy. In both cases the suicide is normally motivated by "shame." But such an action is not viewed as suicide by the members of the group of the man who has been killed. The killing requires revenge. The revenge in this case took a rather unusual form.

A woman who had been born in the Namkaj men's house group, but who had married a man of the Ac men's house group, came to visit her relatives in Aman-Namkaj. The female relatives of the Awok man who had been killed gathered around the house in which she was visiting, peering in at the door and through the thatching, their tongues lolling out of their mouths, saying things like "nes normomo," "I love your flesh." Finally, a crowd of Awok people broke into the house and carried the struggling woman away to the other side of the Kampong River, where she was killed. Some of the men wished to take her head and to eat her, but the elders of the group

intervened, saying that she was, after all, from their own village. The corpse was apparently left to rot in the forest. This killing was the cause of further dissension between Namkaj and Awok.

In these two cases, the fact that killing in the village is normally taboo is apparent. There are exceptions to the rule, however, and informants could remember cases of brain- ing visiting guests in the men's house.

All these factors are important in maintaining the intensity of warfare, but there can be little doubt that they are part of an ideological superstructure which rests upon a solid ecological base: competition for sago and fishing areas. Not only do informants say that this is the case, it is also reflected in the fact that most killings do not occur in massive raids, but rather in ambushes and skirmishes in the sago and fishing areas which result when one party or the other trespasses on areas to which they have no right or which are disputed.

#### Military History of Aman-Namkaj

The best evidence that the fundamental cause of warfare in Aman-Namkaj is ecological lies in the fact that its recent history is an example of expansionistic warfare. Forty or fifty years ago Aman-Namkaj, then consisting of only two men's house groups--Aman and Namkaj; Ar-Nanim, another pair of linked

men's house groups; and Ac-Jasiw, a third pair, were all located on the Awor River, where Aman-Namkaj is today. Five or six miles upstream was a village of the same dialect group named Micim-Seso, and above Micim-Seso was a village of the Keenakap dialect group named Wakaniwin. On the So River, a side river of the South Eilanden about five miles south of the mouth of the Kampong River, which runs approximately parallel to the Awor until finally the two join, was the village of Esin, of the same dialect group as Aman-Namkaj, and traditionally related to Aman-Namkaj.

In the next twenty to thirty years, the villages of Esin and Micim-Seso were exterminated. Esin was eliminated largely by Ac-Jasiw, which took over the traditional sago and fishing areas of Esin downstream on the So and on the South Eilanden Rivers. Aman-Namkaj also had some part in the extermination, for Aman and the new men's house group which has branched off from Namkaj, Awok, have taken over the traditional sago areas of Esin on the middle course of the So. Either at this time or later, Ar-Nanim took over traditional Esin sago areas in the upper course of the So. Remnants of the Esin population were absorbed into the victorious villages.

Shortly after the elimination of Esin, Micim-Seso went under. The aggressors here were primarily Aman-Namkaj and Ar-Nanim, but the coup de gras was delivered by the villages of Jepem and Owus, who attacked the bulk of the remaining pop-

ulation of Micim-Seso while the latter were fleeing the Kampong River to go to live in the village of Per, on Flamingo Bay.

Namkaj and Awok then took over the lower stretches of the Kampong River, while Ar-Nanim took over the upstream areas to about the location of the present village of Mipim. Survivors of Micim-Seso were incorporated into the victorious groups.

At about this time, perhaps 1925, the concentration of groups on the Awor broke up. Ac-Jasiw, and the Aman men's house group, moved to the present location of Ac-Jasiw on the South Eilanden River opposite the mouth of the Kampong River. Ar-Nanim moved up the Kampong River to about its present location. After a short stay with Ac-Jasiw, Aman returned to the Awor to reside with Namkaj and Awok.

Ar-Nanim and Aman-Namkaj now turned on Wakaniwin, driving that village further upstream and killing many people. At some point Aman-Namkaj started warring with Ar-Nanim. The latter group was finally driven from the Kampong River entirely and took up residence inland from the Kampong on the So River. At this point Aman-Namkaj very nearly had the run of the Kampong River.

In recent years, with the coming of enforced peace, Ar-Nanim has moved back to the Kampong. It has been decimated,

bushes. An ideology and a prestige system adapted to intensive warfare provided a charter for this history of expansion, but most of the individual conflicts were over territory, and the result of the accumulated conflicts was the annexation of territory to Aman-Namkaj.

#### Other Asmat Groups

In two articles (1954a and 1959) Zewaard has discussed warfare in the Asmat region, making special reference to the village of Suru. Both articles are remarkable documents on intensive primitive warfare by a man on the scene while the warfare was still going on.

Important sections of Zegwaard's "Bevolkingsgegevens van de Asmatters" are presented in translation in Appendix I. The reader will agree that Zewaard describes a state of extraordinarily intense warfare throughout the Asmat region.

Despite the apparent chaos of warfare in the regions described by Zegwaard, there is a pattern. If Aman-Namkaj is an example of a village warring upstream and occupying the sago areas of its defeated enemies, then much of the warfare on the Northwest, Lorentz, and Utumbuwe Rivers is accounted for by the fact that the Keenok villages have been consistently warring downstream.

This Keenok invasion has given rise to intense warfare between Saowa-Erma, on the one hand, and As, Atat, Nakai, Ao, and Kapi, on the other hand. It was this that drove the

latter villages to seek refuge in the controlled Mimika area from late 1947 to 1948. Nakai used to be located where Saowa is today, and still claims that territory (Thooft 1957:1). As and Nakai were almost exterminated (Zegwaard 1954a:8). Today Saowa-Erma and Komor dispute the rich shrimp areas downstream from their villages with Jaun-Jufri and Jamas-Jeni. The latter group, at least, is residing considerably downstream from its traditional village site. Jipawer and Manep-Simne are traditional enemies of Ajam and have apparently captured considerable territory from Ajam. The present village site of Momogo-Sagapo is downstream from its former location, and in territory which Mu and Agani consider theirs. This has given rise to hostilities.

#### THE CASUARINE COAST

The same sort of intensive warfare does not occur on the Casuarine Coast. Father van Kessel (1961:297-298) describes warfare there as follows:

The people encounter one another with much display of ferocity. Displays of force with full regalia of weapons and finery often occur, but they are only demonstrations of the power at their disposal. One can compare it with showing the flag or the fleet. Less innocent is a hostile meeting between villages. In this case the arrows go over and back speedily, even though they be shot in the air. Usually it is only the intention to impose a "punishment," not to kill anyone. If they really want to kill someone, then spears and daggers are taken along. Usually then they attack by treachery some people who are fishing or making sago. This again demonstrates their lack of true courage, just as this is the case with strategically well prepared headhunting.

The notorious headhunting is also practiced on the Casuarine Coast, but is much less frequent than in the Asmat region. The long bunches of hunted heads are unknown here; only sporadically did we see heads without jaws, and then exclusively in the southern part of the Casuarine Coast. The skulls of their own dead [not headhunted], mentioned above, are always complete with jaws. Likewise, one sees here fewer daggers of human femurs.

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There are far more victims of village quarrels than of official headhunts. Disunity over food areas or women is usually the cause. The number of badly wounded in these fights is greater than the number killed. It is not an exceptional thing when a man kills his wife with an axe; even family bonds are not respected. We have been present at so many of these fights that we have to say that they are a normal part of village life. Wounds are welcome, for the scars from them are evidence of bravery, which must later be shown to the spirits. On the images of the dead one also finds many scars. Although the bluff element plays a great part, the people show great bravery in the fighting itself. They have great stamina and gaping wounds heal surprisingly quickly.

It is clear that warfare here is at most a pale reflection of that among the Asmat proper.

#### THE MIMIKA REGION

Pouwer (1955:143) notes that quarrels over ownership of land generally occur only where more than one tribe lives on a river or where different rivers flow from single source areas. Since these conditions are fulfilled only in eastern Mimika, it is not surprising that intensive warfare and headhunting were limited to that area<sup>2</sup>.

#### ECOLOGICAL FACTORS IN KAMORO-ASMAT WARFARE

Pouwer's remark that quarrels over ownership of land generally occur only where more than one tribe lives on a



river or where different rivers flow from single source areas provides a clue to the factors which account for a state of intensive warfare among the Asmat proper which is absent among the peripheral Mimikans and people of the Casuarine Coast.

In the previous chapter I noted that the Kamoro-Asmat people speak closely related languages, have closely related cultures, and apply very similar technologies to the same ecological zones. Among these ecological zones, the tidal swamp, which supplies fish, and the fresh water swamp, which supplies sago and animal protein, are by far the most important. The tidal swamp is generally downstream, and the fresh water swamp is generally upstream. But on the large rivers the tidal swamp extends far inland in narrowing strips along the rivers, and the fresh water swamp nearly reaches the sea in some areas. The pattern is one of inter-fingering. Though the two zones intermix, there is, in general, more sago upstream, and there is, in general, better fishing downstream.

There is one characteristic of the natural environment which is not uniform, however. In western Mimika and on the Casuarine Coast, at both extremes of the southwest New Guinea alluvial area, the rivers are short and narrow. As one approaches the center of the area, the rivers become progressively longer and wider.

This has two important consequences. First, in the cen-

tral area it is possible for groups twenty to thirty miles upstream to exploit a tidal swamp environment, but on the short, narrow rivers of the extremes the tidal swamp is generally limited to the coastal area (Pouwer 1955:3-4 and van Kessel 1961:282). Second, in western Mimika and on the Casuarine Coast it is possible for a single tribe or small group of related tribes to occupy the entire course of a river from the point where it enters the fresh water swamp to the coast (Pouwer 1955:9, 91-93 and van Kessel 1961:280). But in eastern Mimika (Pouwer 1955:12) and in the Asmat area many tribes and groups of unrelated tribes live up and downstream on the same river course.

In western Mimika and on the Casuarine Coast, then, all groups have equal access to both the fresh water and tidal swamps. The central area presents a more complicated picture. All groups, with the exception of the smallest villages, far upstream, have access to tidal swamp and to fresh water swamp. But they do not have equal access to the two crucial ecological zones. Wherever they are on the river, it is generally true that the fishing is better downstream and there is more sago upstream. These areas are occupied by alien groups. The people on these central rivers have responded to this situation by attempting to annex the fishing and sago areas of their neighbors. Villages that are generally downstream

attempt to annex sago areas upstream. Villages that are generally upstream attempt to annex fishing areas downstream. The result has been the development of intensive, expansionistic warfare in the center of the Kamoro-Asmat area.