

CULTURAL CORRELATES OF WARFARE AMONG
THE ASMAT OF SOUTH-WEST NEW GUINEA

A Dissertation Presented

to

The Faculty of the Graduate School

of

Yale University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

1967

by

David Bruener Eyde

Submitted to the Department of Anthropology

May 1966

© Copyright by
DAVID BRUENER EYDE
1967

SUMMARY

The Kamoro-Asmat people of the southwest New Guinea alluvial area apply an essentially uniform technology to an environment which is, in most respects, uniform. The major subsistence activities are sago gathering, fishing, and collecting. In general there are more sago palms upstream and more fish downstream. Because the rivers are wide and long in the central regions where the Asmat proper and the Sempan live, competition for sago and fishing areas between unrelated groups living up and downstream from one another has resulted in the development of a state of intensive warfare which is not duplicated in the western Kamoro and Casuarine Coast peripheries. Increased male solidarity resulting from cooperation in intensive warfare has led to the development of men's houses or bachelors' houses. These are absent in the peripheral areas. Family houses are essentially female places in the central area. Since females have little solidarity, the family houses include only a few closely related nuclear families. In the peripheral areas, where men's houses are lacking, the unity of the community as a whole is expressed in a long house which includes many nuclear families. Warfare results in pressure to create large communities. The villages are larger in the central area than they are in the peripheral areas. In the most peripheral area, that of the western Kamoro, the basic unit of Kamoro-Asmat social organization, the core conical kindred, is also an independent localized group. Two core conical kindreds merged into an affined conical kindred by sister exchange form a unit which appears in the same area and to the east as a localized group. Among the eastern Kamoro, the Sempan, the Keenok, and the Kawenak, the typical localized residential unit is the preferentially endogamous group, which constitutes an independent village or a potentially independent village segment. Among the Kamoro, and probably the Keenok, incest prohibitions extend only to first cousins. The Kawenak, and possibly the Sempan, extend incest prohibitions, in principle, to second cousins. The preferentially endogamous group, the men's house group, therefore must include at least eight core conical kindreds. These are divided into moieties, each of which is equivalent in size and general structure to the preferentially endogamous group among the Kamoro. Leadership above the level of the core conical kindred is everywhere related to the ability to distribute food in ceremonial cycles. This in turn is probably everywhere related to the fact that a leader makes plural marriages. In the peripheral areas, the ability to make plural marriages is related primarily to being a hard worker and a good hunter. In the central area, it is most closely related to prowess in warfare.

Dear Mother and Dick,

TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
	PREFACE	1
CHAPTER I	HUMAN ECOLOGY IN THE SOUTHWEST NEW GUINEA ALLUVIAL AREA	1
	THE SOUTHWEST NEW GUINEA ALLUVIAL AREA	1
9	THE PEOPLE	3
	Language	3
	Culture	6
	Southwest New Guinea Culture Area	7
	ECOLOGICAL ZONES	8
	The Coastal Shelf	8
	The Beach	9
	The Tidal Swamp	9
	The Fresh Water Swamp	11
	Reedy "Lakes"	12
	Foothills	12
	GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ENVIRONMENT	13
	Insects	13
	Water	13
	Temperature	14
	EXPLOITATION OF THE ECOLOGICAL ZONES	14
	Foothills	15
	<u>Stone</u>	15
	<u>Ochre</u>	16

	Page
Reedy "Lakes"	17
Coastal Shelf	17
The Tidal Swamp	18
<u>Fishing</u>	18
<u>Shell and Bone</u>	24
<u>Collecting</u>	25
<u>Sea and Water Birds</u>	26
<u>Vegetation</u>	26
The Fresh Water Swamp	27
<u>Fishing</u>	27
<u>The Sago Palm</u>	28
<u>Clothing and Adornment</u>	41
<u>The Canoe Tree</u>	42
<u>Other Objects of Wood</u>	53
<u>Rattan</u>	55
<u>Bamboo</u>	57
<u>Miscellaneous Forest Products</u>	58
<u>Hunting</u>	58
<u>Collecting</u>	64
GARDENING	64
THE RHYTHM OF LIFE	66
CHAPTER II WARFARE	69
THE ASMAT	69

	Page
Aman-Namkaj	69
<u>Weapons</u>	69
<u>Methods of Fighting</u>	71
<u>The Headhunting Ceremonial Cycle</u>	75
<u>Motivation</u>	76
<u>Military History of Aman-Namkaj</u>	79
Other Asmat Groups	83
THE CASUARINE COAST	84
THE MIHIKA REGION	85
ECOLOGICAL FACTORS IN KAMORO-ASMAT WARFARE	85
CHAPTER III SETTLEMENT PATTERN	89
THE ASMAT	89
Aman-Namkaj	89
<u>The Men's House</u>	89
<u>The Village Segment</u>	100
<u>The Village</u>	103
<u>Alternate Village Sites</u>	104
<u>Sago and Fishing Areas</u>	105
Other Kawenak Villages	106
<u>The Men's Houses</u>	106
<u>Village Segments</u>	109
<u>The Villages</u>	111
<u>Alternate Village Sites</u>	112

	Page
<u>Sago and Fishing Areas</u>	113
The Keenakap	113
The Keenok	116
<u>Nomogo-Sagabo</u>	116
<u>Other Keenok Villages</u>	122
MIMIKA	123
Western Mimika	123
Eastern Mimika	129
THE CASUARINE COAST	131
COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION	132
Men's Houses and Men's Associations in New Guinea	134
Warfare and Settlement Pattern	143
<u>The Western Kamoro</u>	143
<u>The Eastern Kamoro and the Southern Casuarine Coast</u>	144
<u>The Keenok</u>	144
<u>The Sempan, the Kawenak, the Keenakap, and the Northern Casuarine Coast</u>	146
CHAPTER IV POPULATION	149
THE ASMAT	149
Aman-Namkaj	149
<u>Population</u>	149
<u>Birth and Death Rates</u>	158

	Page
THE KAMORO-ASMAT REGION AS A WHOLE	160
Equation of Kawenak with Sempan	160
<u>Mimikan Terms for Social Units</u>	160
<u>Comparison of Sempan and Kawenak Populations</u>	162
Kamoro-Asmat Population Comparisons	162
<u>Village Population</u>	165
<u>Tabaru Group Population</u>	165
<u>The Stam</u>	168
SUMMARY	172
CHAPTER V KINSHIP	174
CONSANGUINEAL AND STEP RELATIONS	174
First Ascending - First Descending Generations	174
<u>Terminology</u>	174
Behavior	176
Ego's Generation	180
<u>Terminology</u>	180
<u>Behavior</u>	183
Second Ascending - Second Descending Generations	187
<u>Terminology</u>	187
<u>Behavior</u>	188
Third Ascending - Third Descending Generations	189
<u>Terminology</u>	189

	Page
Behavior	190
SPOUSES AND IN-LAWS	190
Spouses	190
<u>Terminology</u>	190
<u>Behavior</u>	190
Co-Spouses	196
<u>Terminology</u>	196
<u>Behavior</u>	196
In-Laws	197
<u>Terminology</u>	197
<u>Behavior</u>	199
METAPHORICAL EXTENSIONS OF KIN TERMS	203
Bond Friendship	205
SUMMARY	210
 CHAPTER VI SOCIAL ORGANIZATION	 211
THE ASMAT	211
Anen-Kankaj	211
<u>Definition of Terms</u>	211
<u>The Nuclear Kindred</u>	217
<u>The Conical Kindred</u>	225
<u>The Men's House Moiety</u>	256
<u>The Men's House Group</u>	275
<u>The Community</u>	278

	Page
Suru	287
Nomogo-Sagopo	290
THE CASUARINE COAST	290
THE MIMIKA AREA	291
SUMMARY	301
CHAPTER VII CONCLUSIONS	304
APPENDIX I	308
APPENDIX II	315
APPENDIX III	334
NOTES	359
REFERENCES CITED	361

MAPS AND PLANS

		Following
MAP 1	SOUTHWEST NEW GUINEA ALLUVIAL AREA	1
MAP 2	ASKAT	2
MAP 3	AMAN-WANKAJ	102
PLAN 1	WANKAJ MEN'S HOUSE	89
PLAN 2	THE FEAST HOUSE AT MOMOGO	120

PREFACE

In this dissertation some of the data collected during field work in the Asmat region of western New Guinea will be presented. Aspects of human ecology, including technology and production, warfare, settlement pattern, and population, will be related to social and political organization. Certain variations among the different Asmat groups and between the Asmat and neighboring, closely related, people will be traced to variations in the environment.

The reader will appreciate a word about orthography and the pronunciation of Asmat words. I have followed the phonemic and orthographic system developed by C. L. Voorhoeve (1965). In most cases, the orthography will create no problems. A few peculiarities should be noted, however. "C" is pronounced "ch" as in English "check." "J" ranges freely between English "j" in "jet" and English "y" in "yet." Initial "m" often sounds like a "b" in English "bin." Initial "n" often sounds like "i" in English "din."

I arrived in the Asmat area of (then) Netherlands New Guinea in November, 1961. After a period of orientation, I commenced field work in the village of Momogo-Sagapo, upstream on the Northwest River, in December. I worked in Momogo-Sagapo until my health and difficulties

with supplies compelled me to leave in February. In March, 1961, I joined Dr. A. A. Gerbrands in the village of Aman-Namkaj on the Kampong River, where he was studying Asmat art and artists. When he returned to Holland, at the end of July, 1961, I remained in Aman-Namkaj. I stayed until September, 1962, when I left the field.

During my stay in New Guinea, many people helped me. It is not possible to mention all by name, but the aid of the following should be acknowledged. In the Bureau for Native Affairs, in Hollandia, Drs. J. C. Anceaux, J. V. de Bruyn, and J. Pouver were all extremely helpful on a number of occasions. Mr. R. van Leer, of Hollandia Film, did his utmost to help me with photographic problems.

In Merauke, Mr. G. J. van Gent, Controller of the Merauke district, helped me purchase equipment for the field and extended his personal hospitality. Mr. A. N. J. van der Klugt, and his successor, Mr. Brouwer, managers of the Merauke branch of the Nederlandse Handel-Maatschappij, N. V., provided indispensable assistance in handling sometimes very complicated financial matters.

Also in Merauke, I met for the first time Father G. Zegwaard, M.S.C., one of the first Europeans to work in the Asmat area, and a fine ethnographer. His publications and notes were of great help to me. His generosity in making them available to me is greatly appreciated.

Finally, in Merauke, I met for the first time two men who were to become close friends and associates. Dr. A. A. Gerbrands had come to New Guinea to study Asmat art; Mr. (now Dr.) C. L. Voorhoeve had come to study the Asmat language. Over the course of the next two years these two men aided me in many ways. Together, we began to gain some insight into the intricacies of Asmat culture. As already mentioned, I stayed with Dr. Gerbrands for five months. On many occasions, Dr. Voorhoeve and his wife, Leonie, extended their hospitality to me in the Asmat district center of Agats.

In the Asmat area, itself, many government officials and missionaries gave me their unstinting aid. Mr. H. A. van der Schoot and Mr. J. W. Kroon, Chiefs of Local Administration during most of the time I was there, and Mr. J. Watrin, chief of police, repeatedly supplied me with transportation and other help. Dr. V. F. P. M. van Amelsvoort, M.D., cured me of many ills and was, besides, a good friend. Among missionaries, I should like to mention, especially, Fathers W. van Dongen and H. von Pej, M.S.C., Fathers F. Pitka, D. Hesch, and A. Sowada, O.S.C., and Mr. W. Hekman, of The Evangelical Alliance Mission. All provided indispensable hospitality, assistance, and insights into Asmat culture.

C. C. Verhey van Wijk, of the INEX Corporation in Jamas, very probably saved my life on one occasion and ren-

dered invaluable help on a number of others.

Though they will never read these pages, my gratitude to the people of Momogo-Sagapo and Aman-Namkaj must also be expressed. They are the most infuriating, sly, dramatic, proud, lovable, admirable people I have ever known. Only those who have experienced the maelstrom of Asmat village life can fully appreciate them. Without their consistent tolerance of my prying and naivete nothing could have been accomplished. In particular, I should like to mention my best informants in Aman-Namkaj: Mataj, Kokornam, Jwutakajen, Siman, and, above all, Kermit.

Outside New Guinea, I would like to thank the National Institute of Mental Health for the several fellowships, research grants, and field research grants, which financed two years of graduate study and my field work. Thanks are also due to the Stichting Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek van de Tropen, formerly the Stichting Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Nieuw-Guinea. It was their invitation to participate in the study of Asmat culture along with Dr. A. A. Gerbrands and Mr. C. L. Voorhoeve that led to my decision to work in the Asmat area.

Dr. Leopold J. Pospisil first interested me in New Guinea. His sympathetic advice, both prior to going into the field and since my return, has been invaluable.

Mrs. Jean LeRiche typed the manuscript. John Gierlich drew the maps and plans. Much credit is due them for their accuracy and speed in a crisis situation.

My wife, Donna, has helped me in so many ways that I cannot count them. Above all, her sympathetic support kept me going through many blue days.

My mother and father managed mail and finances, went through agonies for months when there was no mail, helped me financially and morally, and simply put up with me, during the years of field work and the years of writing. Without their help, there would be no dissertation. I dedicate it to them.