

## Headhunting Practices of the Asmat of Netherlands New Guinea

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THE inhabitants of the swampy areas of southern Netherlands New Guinea have won a reputation for their headhunting practices. Because these practices were carried out even in the Australian Territory of Papua, which caused the Australian Government to protest, the Dutch Colonial Administration was forced to establish the first police post in Merauke with the Marind people (1902). The Jaqai have been forced to stop headhunting only since World War II; and the Asmat (at present thought to number about 25,000) still continue the practice.

During my stay with the Asmat (1952-1956; I had been with the related Mimikan tribes from 1946 to 1952) I had ample opportunity to study their headhunting practices on hundreds of occasions, as I was the first white man to take up residence among them and there was no representative of the Dutch Colonial Administration to enforce the ordinances against headhunting that were carried out elsewhere.

Though we may expect that even with the Asmat headhunting will gradually decrease and finally vanish, it is worth while to analyze the ideologies from which this practice originated. For, even when the Asmat people will no longer hunt heads, they will have these ideologies.

Because it is impossible to mention in detail all the differentiations that occur in the various districts among the different tribes of the Asmat area, I shall limit myself to the coastal area, notably to the inhabitants of the village of Sjuru, at the mouth of the Utumbuwé river near Flamingo Bay.

It may be mentioned in passing that the Asmat have associated headhunting with cannibalism. I had many an opportunity to observe this, but this exposition may make it clear that cannibalism is not the objective of headhunting (as far as the Asmat are concerned), but only a subsidiary part of it.

I will first give the mythical origin of the hunting feast and describe the ritual as taught in the past and executed by following generations. This mythical background was told to me by Warsékomen, elderly chieftain of Sjuru, an extremely clever man with a remarkable memory (he knew nine past generations of all clans in his tribe; in many instances I was able to check the correctness of his information against other sources). In his description of the myth he typically mixed the myth and the reality as experienced by him.

In the second part I will describe a number of customs and rituals that have a more or less close connection with headhunting, and the actual headhunting raid. In the third and final part I will attempt an explanation of the headhunting practice, in which we will meet with several factors that may have influenced the Asmat simultaneously, but not to the same extent.

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### 1. THE MYTH BEHIND HEADHUNTING (AS TOLD BY WARSÉKOMEN)

There were two brothers. The senior was called Desoipitsj (*deso*—wound; *ipitsj*—man: man with wound) and the junior Biwiripitsj (*biwir* or *bewor*—many colored parrot: parrot man). Because of his physical condition the elder brother had always to stay indoors and the younger had to go out to support him. One day, returning from a hunting trip, Biwiripitsj brought home a pig. He cut off the head and thrust a dagger into the throat so that the point came out through the neck. The dagger was a sharpened cassowary thighbone. With the point of the dagger Biwiripitsj pinned the head of the pig to the floor of the hut, which was covered with bark. The elder brother had been watching and after some time remarked: "Bah, a pig's head is but a pig's head. Why not replace it with a human head? That would be something, I think." But the younger brother didn't like the idea at all. "What are you talking about? Besides, where could I get a human head?" (The story presupposes that just the two brothers are around.) The older brother insisted, and proposed: "Well, you can have my head." But the younger wouldn't hear of this and refused emphatically. However, Desoipitsj continued to argue and in the end succeeded in persuading his younger brother. Biwiripitsj thereupon killed Desoipitsj with a spear, cut into the throat with a bamboo knife as far as he could, and pressed the head forward until the vertebrae of the neck cracked. He then removed the head from the body. The loose head, however, was able to speak and it gave instructions to Biwiripitsj, who obediently executed the orders given by it.

(1) To begin with, the head of Desoipitsj taught Biwiripitsj the technique of butchering (*nao*). He was told to make a deep cut with a bamboo knife from the anus to the neck in such manner that the cut went through one side of the trunk to the armpit and from there went by the collar bone to the throat. He was instructed to make a similar cut on the other side, but now from top to bottom. Through these openings he had to break the ribs with a sharpened palmwood stick (*om*) or with a stone ax (*si*). Then he put his hand underneath the chest, which could now be lifted easily and put aside. Arms and legs were first loosened, then cut off. Now Biwiripitsj took the entrails as in a bundle and removed them from the backbone with a vigorous jerk. Only the backside remained. The various parts, including the entrails, were placed in the fire and roasted. The upper part of the body and the arms were at once ready for consumption, but the lower part and the thighs had to be mixed with sago (a starch prepared from the pith of the sago palm) which had to be made in the form of long sticks, whereupon these too could be eaten. [Preparation of sago in the form of long sticks is often the usual way of preparation in the rest of southern New Guinea, but is done by the Asmat only on ritual occasions.]

(2) The second lesson related to the triumphant return of the men from a headhunting raid to their village, which was a prelude for the initiation rite of a young man. [Here we note how our informant, Warsékomen, unconsciously shifts from myth into reality; in the myth there was only Biwiripitsj, here Warsékomen and his men from Sjuru are in action.]

Biwiripitsj blew a bamboo hunting horn to make known the success of his raid. On the way home the "paddle song" was sung. But he had also explained how those who had stayed behind—the old men, the women, and the children—had to act. The eldest man was to ask the headhunters approaching on the river in their dugout canoes: "How did you get along? What did you accomplish?" Whereupon the leader of the headhunters, who meanwhile arranged their canoes side by side in battle array, was to answer: "I, Biwiripitsj, have been to the Islands river this night. I killed a man, a big man. The flesh lies in the canoe." From the river bank would come the question: "What is his name?" And the answer: "His name is Desoipitsj." That caused the people on the river bank to jump and howl, while the canoes covered the remaining distance at a tremendous speed. The women had adorned themselves with ornaments and were beside themselves, cheering and dancing in honor of the warriors.

Biwiripitsj showed them how the oldest brother of the mother of the boy who was to be initiated, had to submerge the decapitated head for a while under water and then run with it to the bachelors' house. [Pubescent Asmat boys are separated from their families and live in the bachelors' quarters, which serves also as clubhouse for the men.] Meanwhile the spectators sang a long-drawn "e-e-e-h" and sounded bamboo horns. Then the singers had to harmonize with Biwiripitsj and sing a song alluding to the pose of shame that had been assumed by the initiate. The mother's oldest brother had to pin the head to the floor of the bachelors' house near the fireplace, with a cassowary-bone dagger, so that it might dry partially.

(3) As the head was to play a principal part in the initiation of a son or a younger brother of the headhunter, Biwiripitsj now demonstrated the role of the initiate and at the same time the role of the mother's oldest brother. The latter made a mat and filled it with *eram* (magic) twigs. The initiate took the mat under his arm and walked out of the bachelors' house. He went to a canoe, put the mat on its bottom, and acted as if he returned to the place from whence the decapitated man came. He then apparently changed his mind and went back to the bachelors' house, after some water had been poured over his head. After entering the bachelors' house he sat down on the floor, lowered his head, did not look up, and paid no attention to what happened around him. He assumed the pose of one who is ashamed, a taboo pose.

The initiate, acted by Biwiripitsj, received the name of the victim—that is, of the elder brother, Desoipitsj. The Asmat call this name the *nao juus* or decapitation name, often also referred to as *owam juus* or bamboo name (after the bamboo breast-plate that is later worn as a substitute of the hunted head). The new Desoipitsj persevered in his pose of shame for several days. Now and then the bystanders tried to upset him, but he sat tight. In this way he was to make clear that he was going to be a determined, fearless warrior.

He was subjected to various food limitations—the same taboos that rule the lives of new-born babies—for example, fish with thorns (a form of sympathetic magic: to avoid harm in the future).

The mother's oldest brother held the head long enough above the fire to scorch part of the hair. The ash of this burnt hair was mixed with some of the blood that had been collected in a mussel shell when the victim's head was cut. The mixture of blood and ash was smeared on the head, shoulders, and body of the initiate and thus the identity between the initiate and the victim was effected. Whereupon the initiate was adorned by his mother's oldest brother.

The ritual of identification and adornment had to take place in the afternoon or evening following the raid.

As instructed by the talking head of Desoipitsj, the whole body of Desoipitsj junior was painted with red ochre [burnt earth from the interior]. Alternating black and white stripes were painted on the face with wet ash and chalk. The hair of the initiate was lengthened with sago-leaf fibers, made in curls; a piece of mother-of-pearl had to hang on his forehead; on the back of the head were placed two big tassels of cassowary feathers; in the septum was placed a beautiful open-work swine-bone or wooden nosepin, decorated with beads or Job's tears; around the arms, wrists, calves of the legs, and the ankles, belts of finely split rattan were attached, and in one arm-belt was placed a carved human bone or a cassowary bone [dagger]; across the chest and the shoulders was put a crossed band; on the abdomen a triton shell; around the hips a sago-leaf-fiber apron [otherwise exclusively worn by married women]; and on the back the bamboo plate or *owam*. The bamboo plates are at first worn on the back and later shifted to the breast. [The breast is the more prominent place, as shown by the fact that it is the privilege of the great headhunters to wear their ditty bag, *bilum*, on the breast, whereas lower persons wear it on the back.]

There are several plates. First, a bamboo lath, *bakar-owam*, about twelve inches long and one inch wide, with pointed tips; next, a combination of two or four shorter and narrower laths that are bound side by side, *owam pa*, and then another combination of still narrower but somewhat longer laths, arranged in such a way that they fill three-fourths of a circle (almost as the spokes of a wheel). The three types of bamboo plate are all used during the initiation; afterwards one type can be used as a common adornment on the occasion of festivities or warfare. Instead of the third bamboo plate a string of dogs' teeth may be used (*juur sis owam*).

When the initiate had been invested with the bamboo plates, the *mbipitsjin* (the skin of the victim that had covered his nose and upper lip) was hung over the plates, after it had been dried above the fire. (This piece of skin is removed separately during the scalping.)

(4) In the next instruction, the head of Desoipitsj taught Biwiripitsj and all future generations how to handle the decapitated head. In the evening the head should be roasted; during the night it should be kept on some sort of loft; and in the morning it should be scalped. But in the actual case of the first Desoipitsj this process was put off until the end of the whole ritual, because he had to continue his instructions. The treating of the head of the victim was again to be the function of the mother's oldest brother.

The next morning the head was to be taken down from the loft and the

nose-skin was to be taken off first. Then the jaws had to be removed. The brothers of the initiate's mother worked in turns according to their age. While cutting and carving they would comment on the victim's past actions; for example, while taking the skin off the mouth one would say: "Yesterday this mouth ate fish on the bank of the river; today it is dead."

A cut had to be made with a bamboo knife or a shell across the head from the root of the nose to the nape of the neck. Thus the skin could be torn off in two pieces toward the ears.

The jaw bone had to be thrown outside; those interested could take it. It was eagerly seized and used as an ornament on the breast of a boy or woman who had to participate in the initiation rite.

The preparation of the head went on. It was held above the fire so that the flames touched the temple and the back. Then a hole was cut into it with the narrow side of a stone ax. The ax had been decorated and had been named after the victim [initiate]. The brains were then shaken out through the hole and caught in a mat. The mucus that came out first was at once removed. The brains were deposited in an *an*, a vessel made of the leaf-sheath of a sago palm. The remaining bits of brain were scraped out with a bamboo knife. About midnight the brains, mixed with sago prepared in the form of long sticks, were eaten exclusively by the old men.

After the eating of the brains, the leaves in which the sago had been wrapped were put in the *eram okop*, the magic mat. Into this mat also went the inedible parts of the body: eye balls, genitals and the like. [Information about the contents of the mat was whispered into my ear by Warsékomen.]

Thereupon the skull was painted with ash, ochre, and chalk, and then decorated with tassels of cassowary feathers, beads, and so forth. The nose was filled with resin, and a net was drawn over the whole head to facilitate attaching the ornaments. The decorated head was laid between the spread legs of the initiate, who meanwhile had been sitting on the floor of the bachelors' house in his pose of shame. In the myth the head of Desoipitsj was placed against the groin of the initiate. The head had to remain there for two or three days, and the initiate had to look at it incessantly. He could take food only stealthily, when no one watched him.

During these days the women of the celebrating community had to collect young pith of the sago palm, and each time they came home in the evening they had to announce their return by blowing bamboo hunting horns.

(5) One or two days later the ceremonies were continued according to the next instruction of Desoipitsj. Every villager had to adorn himself, and the canoes too had to be freshly painted with ochre and chalk. Everyone boarded the canoes. The initiate stood in the canoe of his relatives, and the skull was placed before him on the bottom of the canoe. The brothers of the initiate's mother were to stand in front of him; later they would squat. Like an old man, the initiate would lean on a stick on which was set a disk with a hole in the center so that a few inches of the stick would show above the disk. The initiate

would hold the stick with two hands somewhere in the middle. Slowly the canoes, manned with drumming and singing villagers, began to move down the river toward the sea—to the west, to where the sun sets.

The initiate acted like a worn-out old man; he appeared to become weaker and weaker, the farther westward they went. After a while he began to lean on the shoulder of an uncle and finally collapsed and lay down on the bottom of the canoe.

At that stage he was lifted by one of his mother's brothers and, together with the skull, was immersed for a while in the sea. After he was hauled back into the canoe, all his ornaments were taken off and put in the magic mat; they were never to be removed from it. From this moment on, the skull was no longer used by the initiate; he had to hang it on the breast of a woman, who had asked the owner-hunter for this favor.

While singing, all turned back toward the land, to the east, to where the sun rises. When they reached the shore, they entered the tide-flooded forest to look for crabs. The initiate joined them, but he had to be careful not to break off the pincers of a crab, as that might cause the death of the headhunter.

The initiate now acted as a new-born babe, and then as a child who did not know how to handle a paddle. He acted as if he did not know the name of the river and its tributaries, or the names of the trees. But gradually he seemed to learn more and more. At every tributary his name was called and he answered with his bamboo horn.

Back again in the village he did not enter the bachelors' house, but went to the house of his family. There he was again decorated from head to foot, and now the bamboo plates were hung on his breast while all present sounded a long-drawn "é-é-é-é-h." Henceforth the initiate acted as a young man, full of vigor and admired by all.

(6) After the submersion rite there were a few days of rest. The next instruction called for a ceremony in the sago-woods. While the whole community watched, the brothers of the initiate's mother cut down a sago palm and removed the bark. The initiate looked on, together with the woman to whom he had handed the skull. Somewhere near the middle of the palm trunk a *gaba-gaba*, sago-leaf-stalk, was planted by his mother's brothers. By loosening the rind, except at the top and bottom of the stalk, they could bend the middle part so that an oblong hoop was formed.

First the woman with the skull approached and swung with a sago pounder through the opening of the hoop at the sago palm without touching it. She handed the pounder to the initiate, who in the same manner swung at the tree. Meanwhile the onlookers sang: "*Amus jene, amus jene . . .*" [sago pounder, sago pounder], following with the same song that was sung on occasion of the preparation of the head.

After this ceremony, everyone went in search of palm pith. The woman with the skull found palm pith for the initiate, who repaid her with pith that he had found. The woman also prepared some sago in the shape of a stick and

gave a few pieces to the boy. Other pieces were put in the magic mat.

The ritual ended with the brothers of the initiate's mother decorating him once again.

The night after the sago-pounding ritual there was a dance in the bachelors' house, with drums providing the accompaniment. The following morning all lengthened their hair with curled sago-leaf fibers. For the last time the initiate and the skull were decorated for the final ceremony, which was to take place the next night. The skull was hung in the center of the bachelors' house. At night a fire was built in front of the house, and singers and dancers sat in groups in solemn silence. Then the initiate came out of the bachelors' house, carrying the magic mat under his arm and in his hand the richly decorated skull. The men carried shields which they moved up and down, toward them and away from them, while a song was intoned; the dance began and the initiate joined the men, swinging the skull. The songs which were sung during the preparation of the head and during the sago pounding were repeated.

This dance, which with some breaks lasted until dawn, completed the *nao pokmbu*, the headhunting and initiation festivity.

In the myth the head of Desoipitsj was at this time roasted and scalped, as described earlier, after it had once more emphatically ordered that in the future all should obey its instructions.

Warsékomén ended his description of the myth with this apologetic remark: "If Desoipitsj had not pressed the headhunting and butchering on his brother Biwiripitsj, we the people of the Asmat would never have been headhunters."

*Additional remarks on the mythical procedures.* Thus, in the myth, the headhunting festivity came down from Desoipitsj, who instructed his younger brother in everything connected with the festivity.

The first ceremony was the butchering. The method described above is also applied when a cassowary, pig, crocodile, or big lizard is slaughtered. Throughout New Guinea we find regional instructions on the slaughtering of animals, and these regional methods are faithfully executed on both animals and human beings.

The actions of both the headhunters and those who stayed behind are also regulated; they consist mostly of certain traditional songs.

The heads acquired are intended for the initiation of sons and younger brothers, nephews and cousins. At times it is hard for a hunter to decide who is to be favored. All the different sections of the village, grouped around the bachelors' houses, have claims and those who have treated the others expect a feast in return. Often the claims of the different clans would lead to altercations and sometimes to bloodshed. On such occasions the corpses of the headhunting victims would be the subject of fights, would be taken and retaken by the different factions. It has happened that village unity has been permanently damaged by such fights.

Young boys are the proper candidates for heads, but, in what seem abnormal circumstances, older males and even women may be favored. The pose of

the initiate, acting as if he were the decapitated victim, has a special meaning. The informants emphasized repeatedly that the initiate is smeared with the ash of the burnt hair and with the blood of the victim. This is explained by the fact that the initiate assumes the name of the victim. This identity between victim and initiate will later prove very useful. When meeting the initiate, even after many years, relatives of the murdered person will always call him by his assumed name, the victim's name, and treat him as their relative. They 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 one's village. These people are often chosen to be negotiators. On my tours I frequently hired them to be my guides to tribes hostile to their community. More than once I witnessed persons with the adopted names of headhunting victims being enthusiastically welcomed by relatives of the victim, especially on our Mission station where we had visitors from all parts of the district. Cases are known of the killing of such people but it is considered a very serious breach of the taboo law, and violators were said ultimately to meet their punishment, for example by the extinction of the whole family by disease.

There are definite regulations governing what is to be done with the head and how the scalping, removal of the brains, and decoration of the skull have to be performed. It should be noted that the initiate is absolutely excluded from the cannibalistic meal, in which the brains are consumed. It is certain that only the head is taken to the bachelors' house (social and ritual center of the neighborhoods), where it must undergo the ritual treatment. The flesh of the body is distributed at once after the butchering, according to the traditional scheme, among relatives and friends; after the return to the village it is taken to their homes. Even the women and children get their share. The bones are for the dogs.

For a considerable time the skull must rest between the thighs of the initiate, almost touching his genitals; thus there is thought to be a relationship between the skull and the genitals of the youngster, whose initiation marks his entry into manhood.

The immersion rite is clearly a rite of passage, with a ritual death and ritual rebirth. A cosmic event—the daily course of the sun—seems to have suggested this ritual: a parallelism in which sunrise is thought of as birth and sunset as death.

The sago pounding and the nightly dance with the decorated skull need not be interrelated, as may be gathered from the lapse of time between these phases. It is possible that the ritual sago pounding is a later addition for it seems to be associated with the following myth, which was related in the form of a song in a bachelors' house of Sjurú on the occasion of the inauguration of that house in the Ar section (December 26, 1953): *omo Failepi omo*. . . (*Failepi* is the name of a river, southeast of the Asmat area; *ep* is the mouth of the river; *om* is a club, used by those who have no axes, to uproot the soil around a tree and also to remove the rind from a trunk.)

Biwiripitsj [this name appears in many mythical stories] went with his wife

and children to the river Fait to pound sago. Near the mouth (*ep*) of the river he felled a palm that was in full flower and with his rooting stick he removed the rind, beginning at the *umu* (part of the trunk where the branches begin) and cutting toward the *mopan* (the thick part near the roots). Biwiripitsj then called his son and ordered him to lie prostrate on the bare trunk of the tree. The boy did so. The father [according to some versions the mother] took a sago pounder and struck the boy's neck with force. The head, decorated with hair-lengthenings, was separated from the body and with a few jumps landed in a *jimemmul* tree, where it became entangled by the hair. Blood from the head trickled down the trunk. The chin pointed upward and the hair-lengthenings hung down. The father [or mother] struck again and again with the pounder and smashed the body. Blood and flesh were entirely mixed with the pith of the sago palm, and the entrails splashed high into the surrounding trees. When the mother began to work the pith, it proved to be very easy to knead. She rejoiced and said: "Before it was very hard to knead sago and wring it out, now it's extremely easy." The son, however, was not completely dead, for the head began to talk. He taught his father the songs that have to be sung at the decapitation festivities: the songs on the way home from a raid, at the arrival in the village, when shaking out the brains, and so on.

## 2. CUSTOMS AND RITUALS CONNECTED WITH HEADHUNTING

*Ancestors' cult.* Before we discuss the various ceremonies in detail, it will be necessary to indicate first the relation between war (in the form of headhunting) and other rituals. Almost every larger festivity or public ritual presupposes a headhunting raid. The festivities occur at regular, short intervals and generally last for several months. Often the festivities are organized at the same time or with a short interval in the various neighboring villages.

The main festivities are: (a) the celebration at the building of a new bachelors' house, (b) the festivities on the occasion of the carving and the erection of an ancestor pole, and (c) the weaving of masks, followed by a solemn mask dance. On the occasion of any of these celebrations the spirits of the dead are supposed to come back to the community of the living.

When celebrating the building of a bachelors' house, grubs of the sago beetle are gathered and solemnly poured down from a loft into a cylindrical basket of sago-leaf ribs (*gaba-gaba*). The basket (*samu mini*: *samu* is the name for the spirits of the decapitated, spirits without heads; *mini* means a straight basket), which may be five to seven feet long, is filled to the brim and taken apart after the ceremony.

In the case of the ancestor pole, the spirits are carved in wood—for example, on the prow of a canoe.

The masks too represent the spirits of the deceased. However, on each occasion (celebration of the bachelors' house, the ancestors' pole, the masks) the spirits are allowed to stay for just one night. Then they are terrified and attacked without mercy. Thus, it seems that all festivities have the same object: to drive away the souls, who are forced to migrate to the *safan*, the realm of the souls, beyond the sea.

These rituals revive the memory of the dead and their revengeful feelings. But there is more: when we try to find out which spirits seem to play a part in the rituals, we discover that they involve largely the spirits of decapitated people—in other words, spirits who have a special reason to be angry or who, when living, had proven that they were not to be mocked at; spirits who may harm the community. Even these spirits are urged to leave and to cross to *hades*. When they have received the satisfaction of revenge they are more easily induced to go away.

The names of these spirits are passed on to other persons who will take over their duties and functions, and thus it is made quite clear to them that they are no longer needed.

On similar occasions the neighboring Kamoro (in Mimika) tell the spirits that they are indeed excellent boar hunters or war-lords, but that the survivors can easily get along without them, because there are still good hunters and war-lords left in the community. In fact, the Asmat and Kamoro tribes have much in common, both in language and culture.

As headhunting appears to be a part of the big rituals and because those rituals aim at driving away the spirits, it may be inferred that headhunting is also practiced to get even with and to satisfy the spirits. Thus it is practiced to urge the spirits to retreat.

Therefore, such rituals are not foreign to the general frame of Asmat religion in which the spirits of the deceased play the predominant part; on the contrary, they are an integral part of the religion. New canoes, new houses, spears, paddles, breast- and back-bags, strings of dogs' teeth, and even domestic dogs and pigs are named after the dead. The ornamentation of the mentioned objects can be understood in terms of this attitude and it is not surprising that human figures—either realistically or idealistically represented—are the essential pattern of Asmat art. And in the mind of the Asmat, they are real, they live. All these objects are generally called *etsjo pok*, things that make great. They serve to kindle thoughts of revenge and may be given to others who, by accepting such gifts, bind themselves to cooperate in the retaliation.

On one occasion, after a murder occurred in Sjurru, one of the relatives of the murdered man gathered a bundle of fire-wood and gave it the name of the deceased. He kept the wood in the loft of the bachelors' house, and after some time offered it to people of the other sections of the village. Those who accepted agreed to help him retaliate.

In the bachelors' houses the posts, roofbeams, central beam, walls, and the like, are named after the fathers and the brothers of those who occupy the houses. In the newly-erected bachelors' houses, the walls would not be placed until the *fo mbufum* ritual had been performed, that is, until the new canoes (again named after the spirits of the deceased) had been publicly put into use by removing the mats which concealed the ancestors' figures.

The Asmat, therefore, is surrounded by *etsjo pok*, objects named after the deceased, which remind him of his duty of revenge. The *etsjo pok* are not limited to private property (canoes, private houses, paddles, spears), but include public property as well (bachelors' houses, masks, ancestor poles).



*Ceremonials connected with headhunting.* First there is the *firao wu* ceremony, which opens the celebration for the construction of a new bachelors' house. A pole of palm pith (*firao wu*), which must end in a thick knob, is cut with ritual paraphernalia. The pole is decorated and carried in procession to the canoe. The accompanying ritual is similar to that of the return from a headhunting raid: bamboo-horn blowing, singing of the paddle song, the loud reception in the village where the oldest man will ask: "What did you bring?" And the reply of the senior man in the canoe: "We have killed a big man, he lies in the canoe." The pole is carried into the village where the knob (*kus*—head) is cut off. This ritual is performed either before or after the headhunting raid. Mention may be made of a similar ritual among the Kamoro of Mimika, in which some people act as pigs and are "killed" in a mock killing; this is in preparation for a headhunting raid. After this ritual is over, the leader of the "pig men" declares that the headhunting raid will be successful.

Another ritual is that of the *eram asan* or magic trunk. When a new bachelors' house is inaugurated, the lower part of a thin tree trunk is smeared with some mixture. The kind of tree and the ingredients of the mixture are known only to the performer of the ritual. During the night, fires are solemnly built in the new fireplaces. One of the leaders holds the pole in the fire; burning of the mixture produces a smoke that has a penetrating smell. One of the components of that mixture seems to be cassowary fat. The performer conjures the *namjipi*, the souls of the enemies, who are much feared, and invites them to come and eat the smell of the mixture. (Namjipi is the name for the soul of a body that is not yet dead.) The intention of this performance is to bring about some sort of enchantment of the enemies. The Asmat are convinced that the souls of the living can leave the body when a person is sleeping. This happens in particular when the head is in an uncomfortable position, for in that case the soul (thought to reside in the head) is more inclined to leave and roam around until daybreak. If that soul, on its wanderings, eats of the smell of roasted pig or of some other things, its owner will be killed not many days later by the inhabitants of the village where his soul was a guest.

On one occasion I witnessed the ritual butchering of a pig in Sjurru; the *namjipi* souls of some enemies were called up in that manner so as to be destroyed.

There is a myth about two heroes, Beweró and Tasjim, who died because their souls had eaten of the smell of roasting meat in a hostile village the night before their death.

If a person sees the roaming soul of a friend, disaster may be averted if that friend is warned in time. The one who is warned must reward his friend with a present.

A third ceremony is what the Asmat call the *dewen atakan* (in some communities the *naan atakan*), which is performed on various occasions. The achievements of the headhunters are called out. They boast: "I killed a big man on such and such river; I killed a big woman on such and such river; I killed another man . . ."

I heard the most detailed *dewen* when I traveled on several rivers which were unknown to my rowers. At every tributary (also at whirlpools, which are thought to be entries to the underworld) all the men were bragging about their achievements.

On other occasions only the most important headhunters get a chance to do their boasting—for example, at the first stroke of the ax in the carving of an ancestor pole, or when the long basket is opened in which the grubs of the sago beetle had been placed, or when new warriors are inaugurated. The foregoing indicates that the *dewen* is always performed in awkward situations, for on all these occasions the people are confronted with something new and all that is new is dangerous because of the new spirits connected with it. In the same situations, the neighboring Kamoro speak of a *kaipiri*, a condition to which one is new, so that one is more subject to the harmful influence of the spirits.

It is entirely in accordance with the general attitude of the Asmat to cope with the frightening situation by over-awing the forces behind it by bragging about themselves. According to Asmat tradition, even after death the deceased will, at his arrival in the realm of souls, tell hair-raising stories of wars and fights in which he was the hero. Ordinary wounds and scars are bragged about as having been received during such fights. The enumeration of achievements on headhunting raids may be seen as an attempt to make the spirits more cautious, and thus it is regarded as a means to safeguard both the person who calls the *dewen* and those who join him.

Toward the end or after the bigger festivities a *fo mbufum* may be organized. This is the solemn unveiling of the carved memorial prow of a canoe, named after some one who has died. The brothers-in-law of the deceased are the performers. They receive a long stick stuffed with the grubs of sago beetles and also a large ball of sago. They take this food into the new canoe, and row toward the hostile place where their relative was killed. Most of the time they do not go beyond the spot where the tributary river, on which their relative had been killed, branches off. There they make a small rack on which both the stick and the ball are deposited, after offering them to the soul of the deceased by a gesture toward the place where the soul is thought to dwell. A few grubs are dropped into the river. The Asmat intend this food to be eaten by the souls. The food is uncooked; the souls do the opposite of what the living do, and thus eat uncooked food. After the food has been brought away and offered, they remove the mat which had hidden the figure on the prow of the canoe from the eyes of women and children. The food is taken back into the canoes; at home it will be roasted and eaten by the brothers-in-law. The day of revenge is not far away: the ceremony of the *fo mbufum* is considered a threat.

Threats are expressed in various ways, mostly in the form of arrows or other implements of war, placed in conspicuous spots. A favorite method of frightening enemies and keeping war psychosis alive is inventing and spreading lies and using tricks to confuse the enemies and make them nervous. I was often in contact with tribes which were hostile to each other, and traveling (for which I

needed rowers) became very difficult as a result of these lies and false stories. The *nao piri* (lie connected with headhunting) is sometimes concocted by the entire group in the bachelors' house. They appoint someone who can visit the hostile village without being harmed—for example, because his decapitation name (bamboo plate name) is from that village, or because his mother or relatives came from there, or perhaps because he was given by the village as ransom or in reconciliation. He is sent to spread some rumor, for example, that village A is going to move to river B to catch fish. Thus the inhabitants of village C will have a chance to gather sago in the part of their territory adjacent to the territory of A. If village C believes this story, its inhabitants will be attacked and possibly slaughtered by A. Before the man who has to spread the story leaves the bachelors' house, all men present eat a lump of sago with which they have rubbed his body. Sometimes this sago is mixed not only with his sweat but even with his blood, taken from a scratch made for the purpose.

In several communities there is a ceremony which the Asmat call *ai tes* (probably means: new ornaments). New spear bearers are inaugurated after being decorated. Sometimes they must stand for two days and are subject to numerous taboos. They must plunge into the river and are then covered with a cloud of chalk which is thrown over their heads. In the Islands River area, the *ai tes* ceremony is considered an indication that a village will soon be going on the war path. A related ceremony is that of the *bajip*, the public decoration of two youngsters on the occasion when they wear their triton shells for the first time. This triton shell is a very precious and important ornament and is worn on the abdomen by the war-lords whenever they are performing their duties.

*Background and Preparation for Headhunting.* There are many variations of the work preparatory to the actual headhunting raid. At times there is no preparation at all, because the Asmat avail themselves of an opportunity—for example, they kill their guests or people who ventured too far from home. Thus headhunting raids with a ritual preparation, planned to be large and to involve alliances, are relatively rare.

It often happens that visitors are cordially welcomed and treated but later killed, especially in their sleep. Such visitors may even be given presents and later attacked as they are leaving. They may be under the special protection of some family which may try to protect them but is defeated by the majority. This, of course, is a humiliation to the protecting family. After one such occasion in Sjurur, a warlord and his group broke away from the other clans and built a new bachelors' house at another spot.

Since headhunting is associated in the origin myths with the ancestors, who were the great leaders and instructors, every village has its own peculiarities. But the main background of headhunting seems to be safeguarding the territory and therefore the food supply. For, according to the origin myths, the prime function of the ancestors is the protection of the tribe's economic prerogatives. The origin stories do not account for the origin of the world (creation), but they do emphasize the fact that the ancestor selected a definite territory for himself and his progeny. As the Asmat live exclusively on the

products of nature without cultivation, ownership of village territory is vital to them. The ancestor of the tribe taught men the use of arms to protect their territory. While the men form a protective ring, the women can pound sago, catch fish, and gather mollusks in the tide-flooded woods. The men scout the area, the women follow and begin work.

Each ancestor left to his tribe his special magic objects which are kept in a bag, *eram ésé*. Some have played a part in the life of the ancestor or his wife: a round stone, a flat disk, a string of dogs' teeth. Some were brought by the ancestor from his native land (mythological world): the tusks of a wild boar, the teeth or the gall of some serpent. Most of them are also mentioned in the origin myth. These objects are called *omer pok*, things to frighten with. Before an attack on the enemy they are used to frighten the enemy and to make him an easy prey.

Ornaments worn in war have the same function as ornaments used for festivities (which are similar to the war ornaments). These festivities are a kind of war, aimed at driving away the spirits. The sago palm is widely used on both occasions. It seems to be no coincidence, but a result of Asmat thinking, that the same words are used for the ornaments of men and for the blossoms of plants and trees. A man with all his ornaments reminds the Asmat of a tree, and especially of the sago palm, in full blossom.

Another group of ornaments (red ochre, white chalk, black ash, bones of bears, bones and feathers of the cassowary, human bones, nose shells, white-parrot feathers, tree-rat skins) are also symbols of strength and courage, which aim to frighten. The ornaments not only display these qualities, but cause them too. For the Asmat, ornaments are equipment and armament. They are not allowed to wear them when on a friendly visit, for this would be demonstrative and would in fact invite trouble. In the Agats district the breaking of this rule caused frequent fights.

The chalk used for decoration is mixed with pulverized leaves and makes the men brave. The chalk thrown at the enemy is of a different composition and aims to frighten. Furthermore, chalk makes "hot" and throwing chalk is a challenge. To "warm up" for an occasion, the Asmat eat the leaves of the stinging nettle (for example, when erecting a bachelors' house) and also a kind of ginger.

In the village of Biwar the men sat around the stone disk which the ancestor-mother had worn on her abdomen. By moving their bellies toward the disk while sighing, they hoped to participate in the courage of the tribal mother who had foretold that her offspring would have the ferocity of the serpent while the neighboring Atsj would have the ferocity of the saw-fish. These qualities can probably be explained as totemistic, for the respective Mother and Father of the two tribes possessed the qualities of the mentioned animals in a high degree, namely, slyness and brute force. One preparation for a headhunting raid by the Asmat is to draw the imprint of a cassowary foot on their soles, calves, and thighs. The same drawing is found on the new canoes and on the stone axes. To the Asmat the cassowary is the symbol of swiftness and strength.

Immediately before the attack, the leader of the headhunting raid ad-

dresses the sun and asks for courage for his fellow warriors and for fright in the enemies. Enemies are lured into an ambush with the collar bone of a turtle or with a forked bough. The warleader makes gestures indicating "come this way." During the night preceding the raid, sorcerers go to the village of the enemies to charm it from nearby. They blow water through a loop or throw it toward the enemy.

Shortly before the raid the *onam so*, the song of the clouds, is sung, at least in the Bismam villages around Flamingo Bay. This song was sung by the ancestors of the Bismam when they rowed down from the mountains to the coast. It tells of the inhabitants of the "world above," of the ancestors of all villages who live there (every village on earth has a parallel village in the world above); it mentions all those who are mad, crippled, deformed, charmed; it tells about the misers, the roughnecks, the lizards, the thunder-men, the light-men, the white-cloud men, the black-cloud men, the ant-men, the gnat-men, the spider-men, the wasp-men, the mantis religiosa men, the worm-men. Of all these people it is said *ae mira fenaao* (archaic language, seeming to mean: they harm us). People of the world above, abnormal people, outstanding people, men of the natural phenomena, men of the insects and the lizards, annoy the inhabitants of earth. This is a striking resemblance to the neighboring Kamoro people who, at the end of the "kaware" festivity, organize a ritual war against the spirits that embitter their lives.

The "song of the clouds" sings of the spirits that set all sorts of traps for men, manifesting themselves in all forms, not only in abnormal and deformed persons (abnormality and deformation are ascribed to the presence of spirits in the body), but also in the animals that annoy people. In the Asmat way of thinking, spirits take the shapes of crocodiles, birds, mice, and fireflies. The spirits have hindered man in various ways and thus he became weaker and weaker; that is why man needs rejuvenation.

The second part of the "song of the clouds" is an enumeration of scores of trees of the species that grow on plankroots, which are the favorite abodes of the spirits, and also of scores of grasses and reeds. From these hiding places the spirits steal upon man, molest him, make him ill and weak.

Next comes the *e'so* in which the different parrots are mentioned. *Bewör* [*paraheel*] *araotsj-o tsja tsjem-a tamoranëse ajua*. ("Younger brothers [araotsj-o] of the Bewör [etc.] to whose house will we be going tomorrow morning?") The Opet, Jür, Sokor and all kinds of parrots are sung of in turn. The text runs as follows: Each line puts the same question to a different group of parrots. (Warriors call themselves the younger brothers of the parrots.)

They continue by addressing the tree-kangaroo (*fatsj*) and different kinds of squirrels.

Parrots and squirrels are famous fruit eaters, as noted in songs and stories, and men about to go headhunting feel a relationship to these beings and call themselves their brothers. (Remember the parallelism between the human body and a tree, the human head and its fruit.)

The song is repeated many times and sung softly so that the singers can not be heard by the women and children, who are sleeping in the family houses.

In Sjurua a swine hunt was organized on the eve of the headhunting raid. The swine was butchered on an open space between the war canoes that were lined up in two rows on the river bank. The head of the swine was offered to the leader of the raid. The people of Sjurua believe that the mythical swine that lured the ancestors of the Bismam group to the earth traveled with them to the coast hanging beneath the prow of a canoe. This swine is believed to join the raid in the same manner, causing a short curved swell (resembling the tusks of a swine) with its growling. This swell will get the enemies into trouble. The Amberep, I was told, had the custom of having the women dance before the men go on a headhunting raid. One of the women would tie the head of a swine on her buttocks. The older men, watching this dance, were supposed to remark that it would be better to have a dance with human heads. (Recall the beginning of the myth of headhunting.)

Another example of the preparations for a headhunting raid is this: The men gathered in the bachelors' house want to know if the raid will be successful. A sorcerer smears his right hand with chalk mixed with pulverized leaves; he rubs the hand faster and faster and so vigorously that blood trickles down from it. That is what the men have been waiting for: there is to be bloodshed! The sorcerer gets wilder, he takes his right hand in the left and swings both hands through the air. He runs up and down the bachelors' house in a trance. Suddenly he runs to one of the men and gesticulates as if cutting off a head and cutting a body into pieces. He becomes rational again after holding his hand in the fire. That is the end of the ceremony.

On one occasion, Jisinamakak of Sjurua performed a pantomime. He imitated a woman who was ready to pound sago and was looking for her pounder, sieve, and bags. Then he imitated a man who was to accompany his wife, looking for his paddle, bow, and arrows. Jisinamakak showed how husband and wife walked to the canoe and went off to the sago woods. After this performance the men needed no more hints. At once they rowed to the Seper river and laid an ambush. Shortly after that two men of Amberep entered the sago woods; they were attacked and killed. Their wives who had followed at some distance managed to escape.

Had Jisinamakak only foreseen the coming of the Amberep people or had he caused them to come by means of his magic? The Sjurua people are inclined to believe it is the latter.

*The Headhunting Raid.* The headhunting raid proper normally takes place in the early morning, shortly before daybreak. The participants, exclusively men, are divided in three groups: leaders who only give advice and commands, archers who open the attack by shooting from a distance, and spearmen and shieldbearers who attack from close by and do the actual killing.

The leaders are old men, the seniors of the families. The archers are strong men of middle age, who distinguished themselves on former occasions. They also hold the bows and arrows of the others in reserve. The spearmen form a semicircle at the back of the village, waiting for the frightened villagers to take to the woods when attacked from the front by the archers.

After the headhunting party has approached as near to the enemy village



as possible in their canoes (the villages are all close to the river), they go ashore and take their positions. Then some one makes a noise. From one of the houses some man will call: "Who is that?" The answer is: "Your husband, Sjuru" (where Sjuru is the attacker). As a result of the sudden attack, panic breaks out; women and children flee into the woods or try to get away in canoes. The men may also try to escape, or they may put up a brave fight, sometimes after feigning flight. For that reason the invaders have every reason to strike quickly. Conditions are not altogether in their favor and the fortunes of war may easily turn.

The young people among the attackers are given the best chance for renown and priority to enable them to prove themselves, but there are always some middle-aged men who want to increase their prestige. In exceptional cases a woman or child is spared. If a raider wants to keep a captured woman or child alive, he has to make this quite clear, as the killing will often turn into an orgy. Such a woman or child will be taken to the attackers' village to start or expand a family. When a village has a shortage of women, their abduction may be the sole objective of a raid.

The young man who has cornered his victim will say: "Fathers, brothers, the women of our village never took any notice of me. I'll take this woman home." Or: "Fathers, brothers, I want an *asé pitsua* (a dagger of cassowary bone, worn on the hip as proof of being a great headhunter)." One who wants a decoration of this sort has to kill.

The success of the attack is announced by blowing the bamboo hunting horn. As soon as a victim is overpowered the *kus jelet* begins: a wild outburst of joy which is at the same time a reaction to tense nerves. The victims are seized, beaten, pushed around, and generally ill-treated. The head of the victim is particular subjected to torture. The victorious raider yells constantly: "My head, my head won in the raid."

It is imperative to discover the name of the victim. Usually some one knows the name, especially when the raid was not too far from the home village. If the name is unknown, the hunters may use a trick to find out what it is. In 1954 three men marked for killing were received in a certain village as guests, and when a song was intoned in their honor they were asked to give their names so that they could be mentioned in the song. They could then be killed.

Only when the raiders are in a hurry are the victims killed at once. Then, only the head and thighs may be taken. Ordinarily the victims are dragged to the place where the raiders left their canoes, and placed in a sitting position in the bottom of a canoe with their hands and chest hanging over a pole. Then the invaders set out for home.

Somewhere on the way they leave a sign for the relatives of the victims, a man's ornament or a woman's skirt, placed in a conspicuous spot. There is no reason to suppose that the female victims are raped (my informants denied that rape took place and I never found evidence of it in the many cases which I investigated) but they are stripped and, like the men, ill-treated in many ways.

The most lugubrious sign left behind was done by the men of Puér, who tied parts of the intestines together and hung them across a small river.

On one occasion I saw a sign composed of an arrow point, a red fruit, and some hair of the victim. The arrow point and fruit were intended to attract attention, and the hair of the victim was identification for the family members who had not yet discovered their loss.

The victims are beheaded one after another at the confluences of rivers or at river bends (places where living spirits are found). The beheading is done by persons with special skill for it; the butchering and the distribution of flesh are done in the manner already described. After the festive home-coming, the raid celebrations, *nao pokmbu* (as taught by Desoipitsj) begin.

### 3. EXPLANATION OF THE HEADHUNTING PRACTICE

In this part I will attempt to draw a conclusion from the accumulated facts and account for the headhunting practices of the Asmat.

The Asmat is not a philosopher and cannot explain his behavior. He lives almost exclusively in a world in which his activities are regulated by customs that have become traditional in his community. Only on rare occasions will he make a more rational decision; as a rule he does what is done by everyone else in his environment and because it is done by everyone else. He will explain his actions by referring to the *o nditsjür*, the ancients, the ancestors. This does not mean that the Asmat has no convictions of his own, basic to his actions. Though most of the time he does not seem to be conscious of his motives, we would not be justified in assuming that he always acts without reason and is only directed by the traditional pattern of life. While comparing the different myths and stories, I discovered that changes in actions had taken place and are taking place all the time, and that such changes are the result of individual, contemporary thinking, of which the people are themselves unconscious.

The practice of headhunting is complex and rather confusing, many factors simultaneously and consecutively contributing to its origin and continuance.

Among the important factors are (1) the cosmology of the Asmat (or rather, the influence of cosmic events on their lives), but this has now lost much of its significance; (2) the economic demand, sago-gathering and its cult; (3) fear of the spirits, expressed in the ritual of expelling the spirits as a characteristic feature of both large and small festivities; and (4) the need of prestige on the part of the male population, the desire for fame and the urge to impress the women of the village. We will examine how these elements are associated with headhunting.

There appears to be a definite association between headhunting and cosmic events though it is not possible to determine whether the Asmat are themselves aware of it. I have already noted the invocation of the sun just before the actual attack in order to get courage for the hunters and spread fear and confusion upon the enemy. The sun is often taken as a witness to an oath of vengeance or to strengthen a solemn statement. Many mysterious things are said of the sun and admiration is expressed when they say: *nambir apok*, the sun

never dies. There is probably some identity between the sun and the tribal ancestors. A wide and colorful sunset glow is a sign of a big headhunting raid somewhere, its red being the blood of the victims. A man of Sjurru is called *jomes omer*, afraid of the evening glow, expressing contempt for his lack of courage. The initiate's immersion in the water parallels the solar cycle—the sinking in the west, submersion in the sea, and rising in full glory on the eastern shore. The usual time of attack is toward sunrise (though this may be for practical reasons). Some ornamentation (perhaps not all) seems originally to have been symbols of the sun, moon, and clouds: red ochre—light of the sun; white chalk—light of the moon; black ash—rain cloud.

Cassowary and human bones, used as daggers, resemble the crescent moon, as do the shells worn in the nose, the dogs' teeth, and the boar tusks. (The Asmat have one and the same word for crescent moon, dogs' teeth, swine tusks, and clitoris, *okos*.) The white parrot feathers which adorn the head and the spears may be considered symbols of light. Spear and sunbeam are associated in myth and song and in colloquial language.

The technique of butchering victims suggests the image of the slowly decreasing moon, the picture of gradual scooping out. After the moon is full, it is exposed to the rays of the sun, for she (the Asmat would say "he") has not set before sunrise. Every day the moon falls further behind and is more annoyed by the sun. The moon is pictured in myths as a man wounded in the foot, unable to get away. In the myth about the origin of headhunting, the victim was called "the man with the wound."

The technique of scooping out (beginning at the top and progressing slowly) occurs frequently in Asmat life: when pounding sago out of the palm, when cutting canoes, and shaping eating-bowls. The same is done when butchering pigs (or prehistoric monsters in the myths).

Again, the Asmat may not be conscious of the relationship between the sago cult and headhunting, but there is no doubt in my mind of such relationship.

The account of the origin of the sago palm relates how the hero, Biwiripitsj, sinks in a morass one night while on his way home. In the night, after a thunderstorm, a magnificent sago palm appears on the spot where Biwiripitsj disappeared. Biwiripitsj's head is found in the bud of the palm, his arms in the branches. We have already had the story of the boy stretched out on a felled sago palm who was smashed to death by his father (mother); the sago pith, mixed with the blood and pounded flesh of the boy, proved to be more kneadable—an important economic factor, as more flour could be produced from that palm.

The prominent place of the sago palm in Asmat life is shown by the fact that sago-leaf veins are frequently used to make ornaments and that many names of people are allusions to the sago palm. Such names show that these men were beautifully decorated, and thus had distinguished themselves as great warriors, for only great warriors are entitled to wear sago-palm decorations.

One of the initiation rituals took place in a sago wood and consisted of the

ritual pounding of a stripped trunk. The myth states a relationship between headhunting and sago by recording how the son of Biwiripitsj was killed to improve the sago pith. The ceremony of the *firao wu* uses the pith of the palm as a symbol of the human body.

Headhunting is required for the bodily development of young men and for their sexual maturation. The Asmat is inclined to consider that things having a similarity in shape or otherwise to be related, as a younger or older brother. He uses the same word for many things that resemble a sickle. Stars, flowers, and fireflies come also under the same name, because they show and hide their color alternately. Similarly, the human body is associated with a tree: the legs compare to the plankroots, the trunk to the human body, the arms to the boughs, the head to the top (often with the fruit that sits in the top). In the related Kamoro language, the word for head is *wé-éke*, fruit of man, for the human head also has a hard shell which protects the core, like the coconut. We recall that the raiders call themselves the younger brothers of the fruit-eating birds, fruit-gathering squirrels, and tree-kangaroos; the headhunting raider goes in search of human fruit: heads. After a raid the heads are tied together in a bunch and hung on the door post or near the fireplace; *kus fé* is a bunch of heads.

The decapitated head of a victim is laid between the out-stretched legs of the initiate, almost touching the genitals of the boy who is about to mature sexually. I have repeatedly been told that after this ceremony the boys grew very fast. The ritual is connected in their minds with the growing of the boys. As the fruit contains the germinative power, for the Asmat observe time and again how a new sago palm grows from a fallen fruit, and as the human head is associated with fruit, the Asmat expect that the germinative power of the head (fruit) will be transferred to the boy's genitals by the ritual of placing it between his legs, and thus that it enables him to reproduce.

More than once I noticed decapitated heads hanging near little banana plantations, coconut groves, or sugar-cane fields long after the rituals were over. The head evidently was expected to stimulate the growth of those plants. At times there was a triton shell in lieu of the head.

When I discussed the health of the children with the chieftain of Sjurru (two out of three children die before reaching their first birthday), the chief remarked that many children are weak and feeble despite the fact that they eat plenty (quantity but no quality). Therefore the parents have to go for heads to make their children strong and healthy.

The murder of a relative arouses feelings of revenge, and the Asmat see warfare as retaliation. The brothers-in-law are insulted and stirred up by their wives, and have to band together in planning revenge in order not to lose their prestige. Thus revenge is one of the motives behind headhunting.

I have already pointed out how the big celebrations aim at driving away the spirits of the deceased, and numerous other customs do the same.

Immediately after someone dies, the women undress and wallow through the mud; the men smear themselves with clay, as a protection against the spirits. A layer of clay, especially in the armpits and groins, prevents bodily

smells from being strong and saves people from detection by the spirits, who have a keen sense of smell. (Swine hunters do the same in order to approach the swine undetected.) Keeping bones and skulls of the deceased is another effective way of keeping the spirits at bay. A spirit cannot stand the sight of his own bones or skull. In places the deceased had frequented, signs (arrows and the like) may be placed to frighten away the spirit. Most burial customs can be explained in the same manner. When a death has occurred in a village, there is a temporary prohibition of drumming, singing, and yelling, so that the spirit will be led astray as to the whereabouts of the living. The larger rituals are influenced by the same fear of spirits. To some extent, a feast may be considered a war against the spirits, as it is connected with war against living enemies.

Perhaps the nocturnal ritual dance (during the initiation rite) when the decorated skulls are brandished, is also to be explained as an attempt at overawing the spirits. The shields are moved up and down, forward and backward, indicating the direction which the spirits should take. This was the explanation given to me on one such occasion.

Attempts to overawe the spirits are frequent; the *dewen alakam* (enumeration of achievements) is one. The faked attack in several rituals, as at the erection of an ancestor pole and the mask dance, are other examples. In certain villages a very demonstrative fight was staged during the mask dance to impress upon the spirits that they should seek safety in flight. In another village the masked persons were "killed" in a mock killing in the bachelors' house.

The desire for prestige as a motive for headhunting is certainly significant, but headhunting would not confer so much prestige if it were not already important for other reasons. The motives for headhunting are many, and they are undoubtedly interwoven.

In Asmat society all prestige, and therefore all authority, is ultimately derived from achievements in war. It is impossible to be a man of social standing without having captured a few heads. A bunch of skulls at the door post is a measure of status. When distributing food on the occasion of a feast, it takes wisdom to give everyone the share proper to his rank and achievements. Successful headhunters enjoy many privileges: they are entitled to wear their ornaments as distinguishing marks; they can expect an extra portion of food when relatives return from a food-searching party; they need not exert themselves with heavy work; they are to be consulted in the meeting of men; they stand better chances with the women.

Out of a hundred proper names in the community of Sjurur, 75 proved to have some relation to warfare: "Our iron-wood tree," "Our flowering sago palm," "Man with the hot belly," "Man with the fierce look," "Our gall," "Man with a body like a *jo*-tree," "Arrows with sharp points." Such were names for heroes. But the unheroic had their own names, too: "Man that stayed home for fear," "Man that did not venture far from home," "Man that paddled away for fear," "Man that did not contribute to the list of achievements," "Man that never blew a raiding horn," "Man that was afraid of Asiwetsj (people along a river), "Man without ornaments," and so on.

It is impossible to compliment someone without referring to his achieve-

ments. The usual titles are: *juus apisjam ipitsj*, man with soul, courage; *aretsjar ipitsj*, great man; *nao pimir ipitsj*, man of frequent killing; *kus fe juro ipitsj*, man with large bunch of skulls; *tsjesesema ipitsj*, good shot. These names indicate social standing. Many times I and other foreigners were given these flattering titles.

Headhunting is not a necessary prerequisite for marriage. An Asmat can marry without having acquired a single head, even without initiation, but he will be constantly reminded of his nothingness. His opinion will not be asked in the bachelors' house; his own wife will pay little attention to him. When his wife wants to hurt him, she calls him *nas minu*, piece of meat; she declares that he is only meat, that he has no soul, no courage. The *nas minu* is the milksop, the spineless fellow, the duffer. He is not considered a real man; he belongs to the category of the women and children. He is not entitled to wear ornaments, has no share in the festive meals, stands no chance with other women. He constantly feels the contempt of the community; he is always the odd man out. As a result, he may work himself into a frenzy and go out and kill. Then he can look eye to eye with the other men and has the admiration of the women and children, for he has proven that he too has a soul.

Bravery not only assures a career in this earthly life, but it will secure an important place in the realm of the spirits as well. When the soul of the Asmat has crossed the big river (the sea), he is at once surrounded by a number of ancestors and relatives who had seen him coming. They will ask his name and how he died. He will tell them in glorious detail about his fights and the raids he was in; his wounds and scars will prove his story. In the realm of souls, as in the bachelors' houses, strong stories—real and imaginary alike—are accepted.

There is also a vague relationship between headhunting and sexual intercourse, which seems to follow from the manner in which headhunting contributes to manliness. Mention has been made of the cry of the headhunters at the beginning of the attack: "I am your husband from Sjurur." It seems to me that the enemy is called woman for more than one reason. But undoubtedly, headhunting is drawn into the sexual sphere. There is a story telling how some men were decapitated and how their heads were miraculously restored, but this was a secret that the women were not to know. When the secret was given away by a child, the men were unmanned and transformed into dolphins (which have a hole in the nape of the neck and a skull that shows a striking resemblance to the human skull).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The motivation for headhunting is indeed complex; as headhunting appears today, it must be understood in the light of all the factors taken together.

Evaluating the different factors we may perhaps conclude by saying, in Scholastic terminology: "the *finis operis*," the objective, is the rite of passage, the initiation; but the intention and goal of the headhunters, "the *finis operantis*," is revenge, acquisition of social position through prestige, and attainment of the ideal of perfect manliness.