Elderly ladies, limber inspite of their years, lead the dancing during an initiation ritual of the Kamoro people who live along the South coast of Irian Jaya.

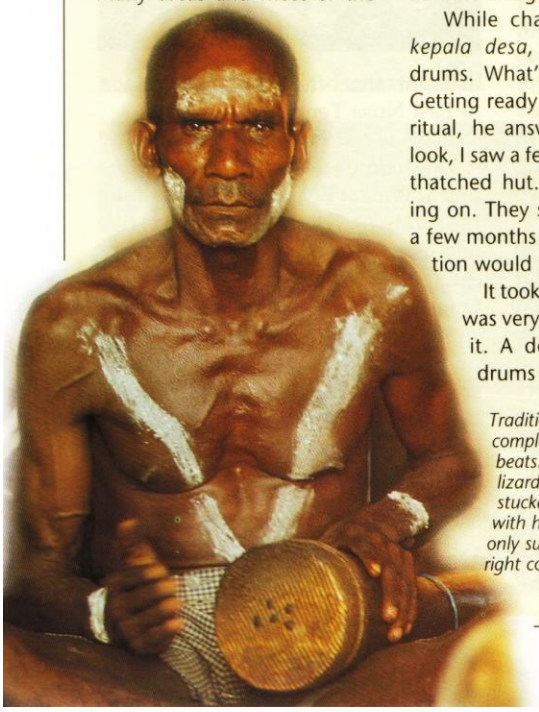
Pride and Prejudice: the Kamoro Culture of South Irian

BY KAL MULLER

IT is still possible, barely. An authentic traditional ritual in Irian Jaya, with not a tourist in sight. It takes luck, heaps of it. A few years back, I wrote a guide book about Irian Jaya. Many areas and most of the 250-odd ethnic groups were left out. Several months ago, checking out a stretch of the south coast for an upcoming new edition of my book, I stopped at Timika Pantai, a Kamoro village.

While chatting with the *kepala desa*, I heard some drums. What's that, I asked? Getting ready for an initiation ritual, he answered. Taking a look, I saw a few men in a long thatched hut. Not much going on. They said to return in a few months when the initiation would reach its climax.

It took several trips, but was very definitely worth it. A dozen lizard-skin drums spoke with one voice as heavy-muscled men chanted a powerful, haunting chorus. The drumming stopped abruptly as the boys rushed out of the karapau or long ceremonial house. They wore outlandish finery and flung powdered lime into the air from bamboo containers.



Traditional drums provide complex , throbbing beats. The drumhead, of lizard skin, must be stucked to the drum with human blood, the only substance with the right consistency.

Riding on their male relatives' shoulders, the boys were surrounded by a shouting, joyous crowd, climaxing the year-long initiation ritual, the first one in nine years at this village. The ancestral spirits of the Kamoro culture on the south coast of Irian Jaya must have been pleased. After several generations, the prejudice against the culture was making room for pride in the old traditions. Just in time too. A few more years of neglect and much of the ancient knowledge and customs of the Kamoro would have been lost for ever. Now the culture has at least a fighting chance for survival.

Head-hunting, cannibalism, ritual orgies of heterosexual and homosexual persuasion; not all aspects of the cultures of Irian's south coast were so endearing as to preserve intact for future generations. But also some of the best and most powerful traditional carvings found anywhere, world-class tribal art. It is a delicate matter, eradicating objectionable elements which form part of an integral cultural entity. And with a very few notable exceptions, the outside pressures for change are not delicate.

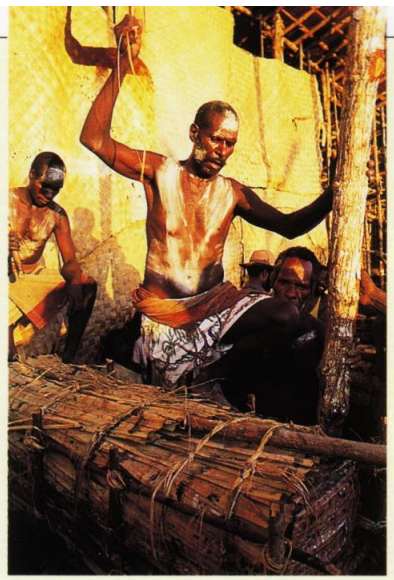
Several days before the climax of the Kamoro initiation ceremony, I thought I had stumbled on a head-hunting feast. Groups of wide-shouldered men in graceful canoes were returning to the excited reception of the women-folk who seemed to have thrown away their normal reserve, exchanged for uncharacteristic exuberance.

That the men were carrying chunks of recently speared wild pigs seemed beside the point: their reception was

Befriending the Kamoro

THE loss of the Kamoros' ancient culture has slowed down during the past few years thanks to more enlightened attitudes of government and church officials—and the esteem given to the Kamoros by a mining company.

The dubious benefits of civilisation were long kept away by an inhospitable coastline and a warrior/headhunting set of ethical values. Neither did the Kamoro tribe lose many of its members to the slave-raiding, tribute-gathering expeditions under the so-called legal authority of the sultan of Tidore.



An elder directs proceedings from the ceremonial longhouse fronted by a specially carved pole which shelters an important ancestroal spirit (above); With a dignified chant, a man cuts open one of the long containers of sago, the Kamoros' starchy staple. A feast with sago and wild boar follows the initiation ritual (right).

straight out of head-hunting accounts of the past. The male relatives of the boy-initiates had returned from a successful pig hunt, essential for the continuation of the ceremonies. Have pigs been recently substituted for humans?

In many cultures, the taking of heads meant a spiritual and physical rejuvenation for the whole village, not only for the warriors. The ladies at Kamoro Pantai village certainly seemed rejuvenated. Elderly matrons were doing sexy steps, shaking various parts of their anatomy in a most youthful manner. Occasionally the gentlemen would come out and join the ladies.

The relatively staid behavior of the ritual was perhaps the leading factor in the seal of approval stamped on the ritual by the Roman Catholic Church. Father John, from Flores Island and stationed in the nearby town of Kokonau, arrived on a Saturday afternoon and took a long look at the ritual. He celebrated mass the following Sunday in a well-attended church. His long sermon, given plenty of attention, essentially stated that the Church today had no objections to the initiation ritual. On the contrary, it approved and supported the Kamoro traditions—a very different message from that of some of the early Roman Catholic missionaries and today's fundamentalist Protestant Church.

There was another welcomed interruption of the initiation ritual. A malaria control team from Freeport Indonesia stopped by for several hours during two consecutive days to take blood samples from everyone willing to have a finger pricked, along with unwilling, screaming children whose parents wanted their kids tested. The malaria control team returned two days later with the results, and with pills for this common but debilitating disease. Malaria reduces energy, productivity and pleasure in life. It can induce life-threatening high fever. In the case of pregnant women, a bout of malaria can contribute to foetal development problems and delivery of low birth weight babies with a much-reduced likelihood of survival.

Many Kamoro babies and infants, especially in isolated villages like Timika Pantai, still die of malaria every year. This is perhaps the reason why the boys are about seven years old before they undergo the initiation ceremony. By then, they have probably survived several bouts of malaria, building up at least a partial immunity to the disease. If the boys have survived childhood, it will not be a wasted effort to put them through the long and complex initiation ceremony.

A lot of effort goes into the initiation ceremony whose final week-long set of events climaxed a year of on-and-off events. Pretty much ignored before, during the last couple of days much attention was focused on the 58 boys—aged from seven to 14 years—from 19 extended families.

While nine years have passed since the last initiation ritual here, at other villages the leaders have told me that they will probably have no more traditional ceremonies—implying that they were finished with the old, "primitive" life-style.

That mentality is certainly understandable in the light of pressures in the past by teachers of the Roman Catholic Church and the government to abandon their traditions. It is only recently that this pressure no longer applies as the government and church have adopted a more flexible attitude—and the fact that a large mining company operating in the area, PT Freeport Indonesia, has actually encouraged the Kamoro traditions by helping to set up a wood carving centre and promoting their dances both locally and in Jakarta.

It is still hard for some Kamoro to understand why, in the past, the outside world was against their culture.

How things are different. The first steps have been taken on the long road from the outsiders' prejudice to the Kamoros' pride in their culture.

But if the Kamoro coast kept the slavers from the west at bay, it did nothing to stop the Asmat from the east. The eastern Kamoro lands were subject to frequent and devastating head-hunting raids from these unfriendly neighbours. It took the combined power of the firearms wielded by the Dutch colonial police and long Kamoro spears to decisively rout an impudent Asmat war party in the mid 1930s. That put an end to the raids from the east but there was a heavy price to pay. The Dutch administration and the Roman Catholic Church both set up shop in Kamoro-land. The free-spirit, semi-nomadic existence of the Kamoro was not appreciated by the Dutch. Clothing and schools were in. Traditional longhouses and rituals were out.

Relatives' vie in the fanciful decorations of the boys during the initiation.

Officials and teachers from the Kei Islands collaborated to burn down longhouses, destroy carvings and ban rituals. The Kamoro offered passive resistance under a veneer of acquiescence, so at least part of their culture survived.

The recent initiation ritual showed that the Kamoro did not fit their description by Father Trenkenschuh, a Roman Catholic priest: "This is a society without pride in itself and one which totally lacks any sense of excitement or enjoyment of life."

In 1982, it had been, according to Trenkenschuh, almost 40 years since any feasts had been held and, by 1970, almost all local art had disappeared and the only artists left were old men. While the Catholic Church and the Dutch government had provided a decent educational system, "In not one village is there a single job which essentially demands an educated person."

That's not the case today. In the mountains inland from their coastal home, an American company started mining copper and gold in the early 1970s. The lives of the Kamoro changed for the better.