

Honoring of the successful Yahray warriors

by Niels Beckers

Introduction

Just as our soldiers receive a military decoration in recognition after a meritorious performance, the successful fighters of the Yahray tribe of New Guinea used to be similarly rewarded with an award.

With this text I wish to contribute to the knowledge of these decorations. For despite the fact that this custom was well documented from the second half of last century, clear and adequate information is currently lacking among the majority of connoisseurs of this culture.

All too often, even in professional literature, the Asmat are wrongly referred to as ethnic group of origin when these decorations are described. Although they had more or less similar decorations - called *owam* - they should certainly not be confused with each other. First of all I made grateful use of the work of Jan Boelaars (1915 - 2004). As a Dutch missionary and cultural anthropologist he spent many years in New Guinea, the second largest island in the world.

He spent most of his time there with the Yahray, which led to information that today proves invaluable.

For example, he came into contact with Jaènde and Jaro, two of the last remaining chiefs at the time from the area around Képi, the capital of the region. Both men died in the sixties.¹ He also exchanged a lot of information with missionaries who had been in the area for some time, such as Fathers Jan Verschueren and Cees Meuwese.²

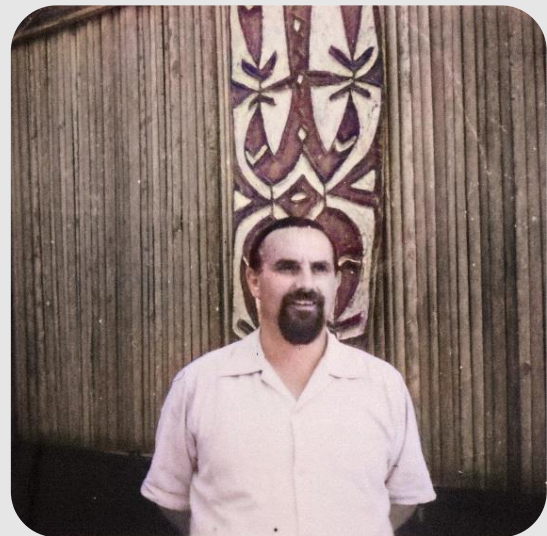


Fig. 1

Recently colored photo of Jan Boelaars with a shield in the background. Photo taken at Képi, 1954.

*Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE), NL
Heritage Center St. Agatha, NL*

¹ Jan Boelaars, *tot mensen gezonden* (Oegstgeest: Uitgave van de Week voor de Nederlandse missionaris, 1986), 11

² Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), inleiding

In his first books Boelaars already wrote about the Yahray's decorations, but unfortunately the content remained very vague. He was well aware of this and announced the following in the introduction of his book *Nieuw Guinea Uw mensen zijn wonderbaar* (1953): "*In due time I hope to submit for publication what is touched upon here, less sketchy and more justified in the details*"³

He put his money where his mouth was with a 495 page study entitled *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian, Indonesia*. Among other things, the use of decorations was extensively mentioned and described, but because the content was so focused on the culture of the Yahray it was too specialized to be officially published.

Despite the fact that Jan Boelaars completed the manuscript already in 1969⁴, it took five years before it was published in a very limited edition of about one hundred copies.⁵ This was the merit of Father Nic. Akerboom, who thought that the book deserved attention.

But since *Vechten of sterven* ("Fighting or dying") never made it to the bookshops it is obvious, and therefore not surprising, that people are currently so ignorant about this matter. Because the date of publication is missing, I take 1974 as the year of publication when I refer to this book.



Fig. 2

Jan Boelaars left an extensive oeuvre regarding the Papuans of the former Dutch Southern New Guinea.

³ Jan Boelaars, *Nieuw Guinea uw mensen zijn wonderbaar: Het leven der papua's in Zuid Nieuw Guinea* (Bussum: Paul Brand N.V., 1953), 8 Translated to English from Dutch

⁴ Jan Boelaars, *Head-hunters about themselves: An ethnographic report from Irian Jaya, Indonesia* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), voorwoord

⁵ Accompanying letter from Father Nic. Akerboom to the book *Vechten of sterven*, 1974

I was also pleasantly surprised to find relevant photos, in support of this text, among the – photographic - documents that Klaas Schoof, through his account *Papuan cultures*, makes available as *The digital archive Papua Heritage Foundation* on the photo service Flickr.⁶

Because I am allowed to use these pictures to illustrate the text, my sincere thanks go to him, as well as to *the Papua Heritage Foundation*. Without these pictures this text would be a lot less clear.

Furthermore, the online database of the collections of the National Museum of World Cultures⁷ also proved to be of added value during my research, as it gave me the opportunity to compare different decorations with each other.

Moreover, I also found enlightening photographic material that I used to interpret certain passages in this text. I would like to thank the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures, and in particular curator Erna Lilje who gave me some useful recommendations.

Although this text is far from complete, I hope that it can be of added value for anyone interested in this matter. For those who wish to go deeper, I recommend, in the first place, to consult the work of Jan Boelaars.

The Yahray of Southern New Guinea

In the former Dutch Southern New Guinea on the Western part of the island of New Guinea, seven large population groups could be distinguished.



Fig. 3: Map of Dutch South New Guinea

There were the Papuans of Frederik Hedrik Island, the Marind-Anim of the coast, the Asmatters in the West, the Mandobos and Muyus at the upper Digul, the Awyu at the lower Digul and the Yahray at its mouth.⁸

⁶ Klaas Schoof, https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/

⁷ National Museum of World Cultures, <https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl>

⁸ J.F.L.M Cornelissen, *Pater en Papoea* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1988), xi

These last two groups, the Awyu and Yahray, were originally called Mappi people. For a long time they were seen as the same group of Papuans who inhabited the area around the Mappi River.

It was only in the early 1930's that a distinction was made between the Yahray and the Awyu. This happened after Father Thieman in 1934 went into the villages of Wap and Molu on the Digul River and discovered that there were Yahray at Wap and Awyu at Molu.⁹

Two years later, in 1936, Father Grent and Father Rievers came to a similar conclusion after an exploration of the Digul. They discovered an area occupied by the Yahray on the tributaries of the Mappi, and Awyu on the tributaries Bamgi-la and Edera.¹⁰

One year later, in 1937, Father Cees Meeuwese began his missionary work in that "Mappi-area". Eventually he would stay there until 1963. A little later, in the 1940s, Father Piet Drabbe began a language study among the Yahray and their neighbours, the Awyu.¹¹

In 1950, missionary and anthropologist Jan Boelaars arrived on the island. He arrived in July of the year 1951 in Képi¹², situated in the area of the Yahray. Boelaars would spend much of his time there, during the period 1951 - 1960, and in 1968, conducting research into the local culture.¹³

Because of these years of experience, his publications are a great asset to anyone who wants to learn more about the ancient customs of these people.

Keeping up the reputation

Already in the beginning of the book *Nieuw Guinea. Uw naam is Wildernis* which Father Verschuieren wrote together with Father Meuwese, described those so-called Mappi people as "*the most horrible headhunters in existence*".¹⁴

⁹ Jan Boelaars, *Met Papoea's samen op weg: Deel II: De baanbrekers. Het openleggen van het binnenland* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1995), 188

¹⁰ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 11

¹¹ J.F.L.M Cornelissen, *Pater en Papoea* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1988), 79

¹² Jan Boelaars, *tot mensen gezonden* (Oegstgeest: Uitgave van de Week voor de Nederlandse missionaris, 1986), 11

¹³ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 12

¹⁴ J. Verschuieren en C. Meuwese, *Nieuw Guinea uw naam is wildernis* (Bussum: Paul Brand N.V., 1950), 16

Even the Mandobo, who lived in the area between the upper Digul River and its tributary the Kao, knew a name for these warlike headhunters. They called them *Kop-kujong* or *Kop ngéwap-kujong*, which translates as *fierce people*.¹⁵

This is not surprising when we see what a central place headhunting had in the life of the Yahray.

For them there were many reasons to go on a headhunting expedition. They did so for revenge, to show their leadership and dignity, to get married, to end the mourning period of men and women after the death of a relative, to initiate children into adulthood, to forge a bond between two men during the expedition (i.e. between the one who killed the enemy and the one who decapitated him), and to honor the best warriors afterwards by awarding them with a decoration of different rank, depending on how successful they were.¹⁶

Who was honored

Unlike some other Papuan peoples, the Yahray did not practice headhunting to add *vitality* to the tribe.¹⁷ The warriors were honored, not the trophy heads.¹⁸

For a long time it was unclear to me who exactly was awarded the decorations.

Among the Yahray, it was customary for a man, after fatally stabbing an enemy, to ask a fellow warrior to behead the victim.

So was the decoration for the man who had killed the opponent or for him who had cut off the victim's head? Or perhaps they were both entitled to it?

Eventually I found an answer on p. 303 of the book *Vechten of sterven* ("*Fight or die*"). There Boelaars makes clear that only those who had killed an enemy, received a decoration. The men who had cut off their heads, and therefore could be considered as the "real" headhunters, did not receive one.

Because I believe that this nuance is essential for a proper understanding of this subject, I would like to make a distinction between the warriors who inflicted the fatal stab and those who subsequently decapitated the victim.

¹⁵ Jan Boelaars, *Mandobo's tussen de Digoel en de Kao: bijdragen tot een etnografie* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp. N.V. - Dr. H.J. Prakke & H.M.G. Prakke, 1970), 28

¹⁶ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 250

¹⁷ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 488

¹⁸ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 479

The headhunting expedition

The real headhunting areas were in the Edera regions.¹⁹ Despite the fact that the Yahray usually went on a trip near their enemies, the Awyu, according to father Hoeboer they even went as far as Muting on the Upper Bian. Informants of Boelaars on the other hand spoke of trips to near Tanah Merah or to Yos Sudarso island (formerly called Frederik Hendrik Island).²⁰

In addition, Boelaars wrote that the Yahray even moved to the Marind on the coast²¹, and it is certain that the Yahray went on a tour to the Mandobo.²²

The treks were therefore well prepared expeditions.²³ Fighters from different Yahray villages would unite and march together. Consequently, the superiority was often great, for the Awyu lived scattered in settlements of about seventy people.

This ensured that not every warrior had the chance to make a casualty. For this they used the term *baba-amön*, which means 'went on a headhunting raid in vain'.²⁴

The exact village that was chosen depended on a number of factors. It could simply have to do with revenge, but on the other hand the destination could also be determined by a supernatural power.

They would light a fire and take turns walking through the burning wood while alternately chanting names of villages. If the fire went out when a certain village was mentioned, then the journey went to that village.²⁵

If one travelled to a remote area, and it promised to be a long journey, then the women went along. Once they arrived at the border of the headhunting area, they would set up temporary quarters for them.

¹⁹ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 150

²⁰ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 241

²¹ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 11

²² Jan Boelaars, *Mandobo's tussen de Digoel en de Kao: bijdragen tot een etnografie* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp. N.V. - Dr. H.J. Prakke & H.M.G. Prakke, 1970), 28

²³ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 252

²⁴ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 226-227

²⁵ Jan Boelaars, *Papoea's aan de Mappi* (Utrecht – Antwerpen: De Fontein, 1957), 95-96

The women did not go along to the enemy villages, but waited in a safe place for their return. A few men kept them company.²⁶

When the fighters had reached the village, they took time to observe their enemies and tactics were determined.²⁷

At dawn the attack followed. The elderly formed the back line and attacked the villagers with bow and arrow. Especially those who tried to flee were caught in the rain of arrows.²⁸

The young men went in front and stormed the houses.

Armed with a shield in the left hand, and a spear in the other, they tried to confront an armed opponent by splitting his shield. When the enemy then tried to flee, the spear was thrown into his back.

When the victim fell down on the ground, he was stabbed by several men. The one who stabbed the enemy to death then asked one of the fellow stabbers to cut off the victim's head.²⁹

No distinction was made between male and female victims.

It could even happen that an unborn child was cut out of the belly of a pregnant woman, so that the head could be used as a *trophy head*.³⁰

Alliance

The above illustrates that the preference was for a form of cooperation during the battle. It was not the intention that the same warrior killed and beheaded the victim. This was only possible if he was completely on his own and could not call for help.³¹

By working together, a close alliance was formed.

Not only between these two men, but also between their wives and children.

This relationship was called *menagaé*.

²⁶ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 262

²⁷ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 268

²⁸ Jan Boelaars, *Papoea's aan de Mappi* (Utrecht – Antwerpen: De Fontein, 1957), 99

²⁹ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 272

³⁰ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 271-277

³¹ Jan Boelaars, *Papoea's aan de Mappi* (Utrecht – Antwerpen: De Fontein, 1957), 101

From now on the men were seen as each other's 'headhunting companions' and later on they would occupy an important place in each other's lives. For example, they were involved in the initiation of each other's children.

The return

After looting the village they gathered the severed heads and the mutilated bodies in the pirogues and returned home.

As soon as the retreat via the river was resumed, they pounded hard on the side of the pirogues with a piece of wood in their hands: one blow for each enemy killed. In between, they blew their bamboo horns. In this way the warriors announced their return and the villagers who stayed behind, or the women who stayed behind in the temporary accommodation, knew how many heads were captured.

This event was called *tao* and the women always reacted ecstatically by bursting into an exuberant scream. Dancing and singing, they would wait for the men at the riverside.³²

Once disembarked from the canoe, a severed head was carried over the shoulder in a *kud*: a funnel-shaped woven basket. On the way to the men's house, called *gajndaq*,³³ the blood of the severed head seeped through the *kud*, down over the shoulder.



Fig. 4

Kud or basket for the severed head

Inventory number TM-6424-17

Collection National Museum of World Cultures, NL

It was believed that the soul of the headhunted victim, called *togoya*, would thus nestle in the armpit and protect against danger in the future. The *togoya* would also help kill more enemies on a subsequent trip.³⁴

³² Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 275

³³ Jan Boelaars, *Papoea's aan de Mappi* (Utrecht – Antwerpen: De Fontein, 1957), 132

³⁴ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 276

To ensure that this *togoya would* not have a negative influence on the children of the Yahray, the warrior had the following custom: the moment a child came close to him, he would rub his hands along his armpits. Then he made the armpit smell by pressing the hands against the child's nose.³⁵

One of the first things people did with the severed head was directly related to forming the children into future warriors. One held it out to the child of the warrior who had beheaded the enemy, and asked it to cut out its eyes.

Through this ritual, the child was directly involved in the aforementioned relationship that had arisen between his father and his headhunting companion.

The lower jaw of the severed head was later given to a fellow combatant. The latter in turn gave the mandible to his wife, who would wear it as a necklace.³⁶

In this way a new relationship was established, namely that between the "head owner" and the "jaw owner". This relationship is called *nakaèri* and as with the *menagaé* relationship there were certain responsibilities attached.

Once the eyes were removed and the lower jaw given away, a hole was punched in the back of the head. The brains were removed, mixed with marrow from the sago palm, and baked into cakes which were distributed to the children.

Then they cut off as much of the flesh as possible from the skull and the head was roasted over a fire. In this way all remaining parts were scorched, so that the head could be kept in the men's house afterwards. There it was hung from a beam in the ridge of the roof.

As mentioned before, the bodies of the victims were taken home. The Yahray were not only headhunters, they also practiced cannibalism. One even had a broad vocabulary regarding the quality of the meat.

For example, *janggo mbut* was spoken of as solid meat from old people. Or *janggo kjuapinden* if it was tender meat.

The tongue and the insides of the hands, especially the soft part at the base of the thumb, were the most delicious.

Eyes, blood and genitals were not consumed. Like the flesh on the inside of the thighs of male victims: that was scraped off because "*they were contaminated with semen*".³⁷

³⁵ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 191

³⁶ Jan Boelaars, *Papoea's aan de Mappi* (Utrecht – Antwerpen: De Fontein, 1957), 101

³⁷ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppennellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 276-277

Boelaars argues that the motives behind cannibalism among the Yahray are to be found in an "expression of solidarity among allies", but that it also had to do purely with the fact that meat was a scarce commodity in the lives of these hunter-gatherers.³⁸



Fig. 5

Recently colored photograph. Original photo taken by Kees van Kessel during the exhibition 'Tambaran: a collecting trip in New Guinea' at the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde in Rotterdam, the Netherlands in 1959.

A selection of items from C.M.A. Groenevelt's expedition was exhibited during this exposition. In the display case on the left you can see a number of decorations.. On the far left a decoration called tok (the pao is clearly visible), the others of the type pogoy-tok, ramog or tok.

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³⁸ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 145

*Types of decorations*³⁹

Number of victims	These decorations were given to successful warriors and made by themselves	These decorations were made by the old men and officially awarded
1	A tail of cassowary feathers on the left arm + a dagger of cassowary bone. This dagger is called <i>Wajrip</i> ⁴⁰ and was worn in a bracelet, called <i>marep-maq</i> ⁴¹ .	
2	+ additional tail on the right arm	
3	+ additional tail on the buttocks	
4	+ additional tail on left hip	
5	+ additional tail on right hip	
6	+ additional, second tail to the buttocks	
>7	Were tails attached to a rattan, so dragged along on arms or legs	
8 - 11		<i>Ramog</i> : decorated gourd
12 - 14		<i>Tok</i> : decorated bamboo lath with two plaited discs, called <i>pao</i>
>15		<i>Oana</i> : necklace made of pig tusks
Whoever owned the <i>Ramog</i> , <i>Tok</i> and <i>Oana</i> received the <i>Gouwa</i> : a belt of human hair.		

³⁹ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 285

⁴⁰ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 285

⁴¹ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 256

After several successful headhunting raids, a pig feast called *batik-jamé* followed. Several Yahray settlements came together for this, but Boelaars could not find out whether a common festive ground was set up for this.⁴²

It took as much as three months to prepare for the feast,⁴³ and it was there that the initiation of the children took place, that young men were appointed future headhunters, called *kuj-wir*, (*kuj* means headhunting raid⁴⁴, *wir* means men or people⁴⁵) and that decorations were awarded to the successful fighters who had killed the enemy(s) during the most recent headhunting raids.⁴⁶

Cassowary tails and pogoy-tok

We can divide these decorations in 2 classes.

On the one hand there were the decorations that the warriors were allowed to make and wear themselves.

On the other hand there were the decorations made by the old men of the tribe. It is this last kind of decorations that were officially awarded during the *batik-jamé* festival.

The homemade decorations consisted on the one hand of the shiny, usually jet-black feathers of a cassowary, a large flightless bird, bundled into a tail. These were worn on the limbs, in the order described in the table above.



Fig. 6

Tail of cassowary feathers

Recently colored photograph

Original photo by Jan Boelaars

Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE), NL

Heritage Center St. Agatha, NL

⁴² Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 296

⁴³ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 287

⁴⁴ Jan Boelaars, *Head-hunters about themselves: An ethnographic report from Irian Jaya, Indonesia* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 294

⁴⁵ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 5

⁴⁶ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 284

In addition, the men who had killed two to four of their enemies were allowed to make and wear the *pogoy-tok*: a bamboo lath decorated with beads and feathers.

The bamboo lath symbolised the *headhunting-knife*: the razor-sharp blade made of bamboo used to cut the head from the body during a headhunting raid.⁴⁷

From now on they belonged to the *Wir-Pogoy*: the strong men who were described by Boelaars as "*the leading generation*".⁴⁸

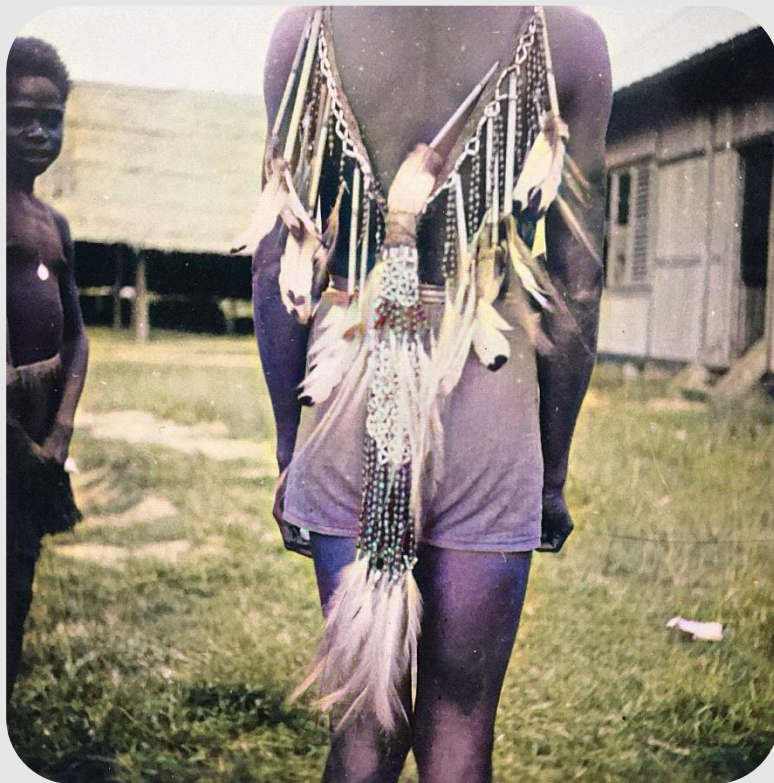


Fig. 7

Pogoy- tok, worn on the back.

Recently colored photograph

Original photo by Jan Boelaars

Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE), NL

Heritage Center St. Agatha, NL

⁴⁷ Jan Boelaars, *tot mensen gezonden* (Oegstgeest: Uitgave van de Week voor de Nederlandse missionaris, 1986), 89

⁴⁸ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 116



Fig. 8

Pogoy-tok

Recently colored photograph. Original photo made by Jan Boelaars of a man with a pogoy-tok between 1951 and 1956.

At least if we assume that this is a decorated bamboo lath. If this is a decorated gourd fruit it is a ramog.

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On the other hand, there were decorations made by the old men of the tribe. The decorations belonging to this last category could only be worn after they had been officially awarded during the festivities.

The more people someone had killed, the higher his rank and consequently his status within the tribe.⁴⁹

There were four of these decorations, namely the *ramog*, *tok*, *oana* and *gouwa*.

Ramog

When one had made at least 8 victims one got the *ramog*.

The *ramog* is a gourd fruit decorated with seeds and beads that was worn around the neck with a feathery band hanging down the back.⁵⁰

The *ramog* is very similar to the *pogoy-tok*. Nevertheless, it can be distinguished from them simply by the fact that a *ramog* is a decorated gourd, and a *pogoy-tok* is a decorated bamboo lath.



Fig. 9

Ramog

Inventory number WM-39382

⁴⁹ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 285-286

⁵⁰ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 285-286



Fig. 10

Ramog

Recently colored photograph of chaplain Emile Andreoli (1909 - 2003) with a ramog, a decorated gourd fruit, around his neck. Photo taken between 1951 and 1958.

*Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE), NL
OFM Archive, NL*



Fig . 11

Detail of Fig. 10

Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE), NL

OFM Archive, NL

Tok

Whoever had killed at least 12 opponents got the *tok*:

A bamboo lath decorated with seeds / beads that was worn around the neck by means of a band decorated with feathers, hanging down on the back.

The bamboo lath symbolises the *headhunting-knife*: the bamboo knife used to cut off the head of the body during the headhunting raid.⁵¹

The *tok* is somewhat similar to the *pogoy-tok* and the *ramog*, but with an important addition. The *tok* is provided with a *pao*. These are two flat circular braided discs that were attached to the bamboo lath left and right.

The *pao* was supposed to represent a compressed *kud* (headhunting basket) and was only attached to a *tok*.⁵² The fathers Verschueren and Meuwese described the *kud* as one of the attributes of the headhunters.⁵³

Provenance:

... - 1965: *Galerie Pluymen, Nijmegen, NL*
1965 - 2008: *Institute of Cultural Anthropology of the R.K. University, Nijmegen, NL*
2008 – 2020: *Michel Thieme Tribal Art, Amsterdam, NL*
2020 - present: *Collection Niels Beckers, BE*



Fig. 12

Tok



Fig. 13

Pao

⁵¹ Jan Boelaars, *tot mensen gezonden* (Oegstgeest: Uitgave van de Week voor de Nederlandse missionaris, 1986), 89

⁵² Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 313

⁵³ J. Verschueren en C. Meuwese, *Nieuw Guinea uw naam is wildernis* (Bussum: Paul Brand N.V., 1950), 104

Oana

Men who had killed more than 15 opponents received the *oana*: a breast ornament consisting of a necklace to which three crooked pig tusks from old pigs were attached.⁵⁴

These were symbolic of the crescent moon and the fighting spirit these animals possess.⁵⁵ From now on, these fighters could start their well-deserved retirement and did not have to participate in headhunting expeditions anymore.⁵⁶

The piece below from the NMVW collection is described on the collection site as being from Asmat. Coincidence or not, these are three pig tusks on a chain, without any other decorations. Exactly how an *oana* was described.



Fig. 14

Oana

Inventory number RV-1854-91

Collection National Museum of World Cultures, NL

⁵⁴ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 286

⁵⁵ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 197

⁵⁶ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 286

Gouwa

The men who possessed these three decorations (*ramog*, *tok* and *oana*) were also allowed to wear the *gouwa*: a belt of human hair. The hair used for this was taken from one or more severed heads.⁵⁷



Fig. 15

Gouwa

Jan Boelaars did not publish any pictures of a belt of human hair called gouwa, but this is probably an example of this type of decoration.

Provenance:

*Collected in 1962 by Mrs. Map van Noort, NL
1962 – 2021: Collection Map van Noort, NL
2021 - present: Collection Niels Beckers, BE*

⁵⁷ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 276

Making the decorations

The men of the Wir-Pogoy, the warriors with authority within the tribe, went into the bamboo forest one evening. There they sat down near a bamboo plant with a highly branched rhizome, a so-called *bamboo chair*. They made a fire nearby and waited there for an "ominous sign". This could be an animal that approached the bamboo chair.

If one received such a sign, then in the morning the young men, who were soon to take part in a first headhunting raid, were brought to that particular spot in the forest. A few bamboo stalks were cut by the leaders.

Once all the stalks were cut, the youngsters carried them to the men's house.

Here the stems were laid down on mats, sometimes with a recently cut head placed next to it.

The elders then instructed the young men to trample the bamboo stalks with their feet until they split.⁵⁸

The leader picked up a piece of the split bamboo and then addressed the young men. They were told to be brave so that they could crush the enemy like they had just done with the bamboo. The so-called headhunting-knives, the knives used during the headhunting raid, were now to be made from this bamboo. Their fathers were entrusted with this task.

After this speech, the leader took a new piece of bamboo from the ground with his right hand and raised it into the air. He mentioned the name of a successful warrior who would soon be awarded a decoration and asked the old men present who would like to make a *tok* from this piece of bamboo for that particular warrior.

When one of the men then approached him and took the piece of bamboo from his hand, the leader continued. Again he took a piece from the ground, this time with his left hand, and again asked the same of the remaining men.

So he went on, until for each warrior to be honored a candidate was found.

The old men remained in the men's house and had to observe a number of *taboos*. They had to sit on a mat and were not allowed to hunt during the period they worked on the decorations.⁵⁹

While the old men were busy scraping the bamboo slats into shape, the young ones went out to look for bark, feathers and white and red fruits. From the bark the belts were woven which made it possible to wear the decoration around the neck, the seeds were used for decoration. Once all supplies were collected, they were applied with song and dance.

⁵⁸ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuus Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 288

⁵⁹ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuus Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 289

During the time the old men continued to work on the decorations, the remaining men and the women continued to dance until the sun went down. That was the time when food was provided. The women went to prepare sago (a staple food extracted from the pith of the sago palm) and some of the men went to hunt pigs. The remaining men stayed up all night dancing.

When the decorations were ready, they were wrapped in leaves and hung in the men's house, waiting for the festivities to begin. Just before the festivities began, they were brought out again, taken out of their wrapping of leaves and the feathers renewed with ones of a lighter colour and the old seeds replaced with new ones.

In the same way, the decorations underwent a development of fall and rise.⁶⁰ It is also during this last moment that the *pao*, the round braided discs that symbolize the headhunting basket or *kud*, is attached to the *tok*.⁶¹

After a few more rituals, such as the *qaqae*⁶² ceremony (burying the decorations under a large quantity of edible sedges) had taken place, it was time for the ceremony to begin. One started in the following order: first the *oana*, then the *tok* and then the *ramog*. When these three decorations had been awarded, the very best warriors who were allowed to rest were honored with the *gouwa*, a belt of human hair.

Only after that, when all the decorations had been distributed, were the young men initiated by handing them the headhunting-knives, made of bamboo, which their fathers had just made for them.⁶³

After the presentation, the decorations were kept in the women's house⁶⁴, called *uri*.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 485

⁶¹ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 290

⁶² Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 485

⁶³ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 304

⁶⁴ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 197

⁶⁵ Jan Boelaars, *Papoea's aan de Mappi* (Utrecht – Antwerpen: De Fontein, 1957), 132

Now was the time to inform the enemy that new warriors had been initiated.

Dressed up, just like during a headhunting raid, they headed towards an enemy village to set up a warning sign.

One did not enter the village, but placed a pole in the ground on the way to it. The pole was topped by a horizontal beam to which a bow and arrow, a *kud* and a bamboo knife were attached. The things with which they had adorned themselves were left behind on the spot.⁶⁶

The enemy was thus warned, the feast could be ended. But not before one more enemy was killed and beheaded. For this one could go to war again, but it was also possible that an unfortunate victim was chosen beforehand. Man or woman, it made no difference, was then lured to the feast and there killed and beheaded.

This head was also roasted, after which it was placed on a mat and a *tok*, a decorated bamboo lath, was held above it. With a small knife one tried to scrape off some of the wood chips from the *tok*. If this attempt failed, the owner of the *tok* would die soon.

Then they broke off the tip of the bamboo lath, let it fall down on the severed head, and finally let it burn up in the fire.

They then closed the party with the words: "*We're gonna have a real party now.*"⁶⁷

On p. 89 of the book *Tot mensen gezonden*, Boelaars writes what was meant with this sentence:

*"So far it's just been child's play, we're going to make ourselves an even bigger future ..."*⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 308

⁶⁷ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 311

⁶⁸ Jan Boelaars, *tot mensen gezonden* (Oegstgeest: Uitgave van de Week voor de Nederlandse missionaris, 1986), 89

Refusal of the decorations

Duality and complementarity played an important role in the Yahray's lifestyle: the sun and the moon, the bond created between the man who killed a victim and between the headhunter who beheaded the victim, the men who made and received the decorations versus the women who kept the decorations, etc.

As for the sun and the moon, the Yahray attached great importance to the symbolism of their cycles, which consisted of: rise - peak - fall. Young men who were initiated to go headhunting, and were ready to participate in their first headhunting raid were therefore called *Nogoki-tapag*: 'young suns'. Men who were already honored as successful warrior, on the other hand, were given the name *Magati-tapag* which means 'enduring, lasting suns'.⁶⁹

This way of thinking led to the fact that fighters sometimes refused a decoration, even though they were entitled to it. In that case one feared that by accepting a higher medal, one would soon reach their peak.

After the climax, destruction would follow. For the Yahray, this meant the prospect of physical deterioration and subsequent death.

So it happened that, out of fear of dying, people refused to accept a decoration.⁷⁰

Interesting facts about the decorations

- Children imitated headhunting from an early age. They cut off the heads of lizards and made decorations out of leaves.⁷¹
- After their death the most successful warriors - those who wore the *gouwa* and thus already possessed the *ramog*, *tok* and *oana* - were treated most extensively. It began with the cutting off of the head hair and beard of the deceased warrior. Then he was painted, adorned and finally decorated with his decorations.

In the men's house they placed the embellished body, in a sitting position. Accompanied by song and dance, they mourned the loss of their loved one.

Part of the roof of the men's house was opened up, after which they placed a scaffold that reached to the (opened) ridge.

⁶⁹ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 197

⁷⁰ Jan Boelaars, *Papoea's aan de Mappi* (Utrecht – Antwerpen: De Fontein, 1957), 151

⁷¹ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 245

On top of this scaffolding, on which a canoe was placed, another roof was built. Once this was completed, the body was placed on top of the canoe so that it could decompose in the open air.⁷²

In 'Vechten of sterven', Boelaars writes that the body of an ordinary man or woman was placed in a canoe on trestles. Such a structure, called a *ndat*, was not placed in the men's house, but at the edge of the village. The utensils of the deceased were tied to it. If it concerned a successful warrior, the heads he had cut off, together with his decorations were attached to the *ndat*.⁷³

For every victim a warrior had made during his life, a leaf was also tied to the scaffold. One used two types of leaves: quaruleaves for men, miri leaves for women.

When the body was decomposed, the bones were wrapped in a mat, which was then hung on a tree in the forest where the deceased had property rights.

The skull was kept separately by the women, who carried it on their backs in memory of their husbands.⁷⁴



Fig. 16

Ndat

Recently colored photograph. Original photo was taken by Jan Boelaars.

An above ground grave, called ndat, in the Yahray village of Mur.

On the scaffolding, to which the possessions of the deceased were attached, a tail of cassowary feathers, one of the decorations, can be seen near the shield.

Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE), NL

Heritage Center St. Agatha, NL

⁷² Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 204

⁷³ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 205

⁷⁴ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 130

Some deceased were also buried. Boelaars clarifies this on p. 130 of *Mono Koame*: "Only people who no longer have any meaning in the community, such as a surviving and decrepit wife, the wife of a man who was no great headhunter, are buried without any ceremonial ceremony at the edge of the village".⁷⁵

- The Yahray knew three types of conflict.

The first type was called *nu*. These confrontations took place within their own village. They could end in death, but because they considered fellow villagers to be relatives, there was never any headhunting within the own village.

A second type was called *tok*, meaning war. A *tok* was a pre-arranged raid to another Yahray village and was often set up for revenge.

Thirdly, a *kuj-an* was possible: a headhunting raid to a village of another tribe.⁷⁶

Both the casualties one made at a *tok* and at a *kuj-an* counted towards acquiring a higher decoration.⁷⁷

- The word *tok* is the name for a raid to another Yahray settlement, but it is also the term used to indicate the decoration for a warrior who had killed more than 12 people. It is also the name of the knife⁷⁸ used during the battle to cut off the head of the body.

- Before going on expedition to a distant settlement, they first made peace with the surrounding villages. That way the people who stayed behind, often a large part of the women, did not have to fear attack.⁷⁹

- In order to get to the hard to reach headhunting areas in the Edera regions, the Yahray joined forces with the enemy. They teamed up with some Awyu settlements, because they knew the local routes. In exchange for guiding them in finding the right path, they could count on help if they were attacked by another tribe.⁸⁰

- The Yahray were also called Jaqaj, Jaqai, Jakai, jakaj, jahraj, Yaqai and Yaqay in literature.

⁷⁵ Jan Boelaars en Arnold Blom, *Mono Koame: wij denken ook* (Nijmegen University: Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies, 2001), 130 Translated from Dutch to English

⁷⁶ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 242

⁷⁷ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 227

⁷⁸ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 288

⁷⁹ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 259

⁸⁰ Jan Boelaars, *Vechten of sterven: Analyse van een Koppensnellers-cultuur in Zuid-West Irian Indonesia* (Tilburg: Missiehuis Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart, 1974), 231

Confusion with the Asmat

When we look at the honorary decorations in the collection of the Dutch *National Museum of World Cultures*, we see that many of the pieces bear the following reference to literature: *Asmat. Leben mit den Ahnen*.

This catalogue by Gunter and Ursula Konrad was published in collaboration with Tobias Schneebaum on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name in the Stadthalle hofheim am Taunus from 29 March to 20 April 1981.

On p. 150, illustration A, a decoration is indeed depicted. Although this publication is about the Asmat, the description of this piece states that the village of origin is unknown, as is the name and meaning of the depicted object. (Now we know: it's a *tok*)

Thus, one is referring to a publication that questions origin and meaning itself.

A similar lack of clarity arises when we look, for example, at the bibliographical reference for the copy with inventory number WM-47675 from the NMVW collection.

One looks here at the 1977 publication *Asmat, een verdwijnende koppensnellerskultuur in Irian Jaya* by René S. Wassing.

With the exception of two items, all the objects photographed in this catalogue come from the Museum voor Land-en Volkenkunde in Rotterdam, which is now the *Wereldmuseum Rotterdam*.

On p.55 we also find this decoration. Now we know this is a *tok*, but the description says *owam* and states that the decoration would represent a surrogate of a severed head.



Fig. 17

Canoe with Asmat: 1950 - 1956

Recently colored photo.

Original photograph by Kees van Kessel

Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE), NL

That this piece is called *owam* is a mistake. It seemed to be based on the work of father Gerard A. Zegwaard (1919 - 1996), who worked as a missionary in New Guinea and who was very fond of ethnographic research.⁸¹

Zegwaard published in December 1959 in *American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 61, No. 6* on pp. 1020 - 1041 the piece *Headhunting Practices of the Asmat of Netherlands New Guinea* and described in it on page 1022 and 1023 some ornaments made of bamboo, that were first worn on the back, and later on the chest.

In it he distinguished three types, namely:

- The *bakar-owam*: a chain with a bamboo strip of about 2.5 cm width attached to it.
- The *owam pa*: a chain with two to four short and thin bamboo slats attached to it
- There was also a chain to which a decoration was attached consisting of thin bamboo slats tied together in a circular shape.

According to Zegwaard, these three types of *owam* were used during the initiation of men, but could also be worn afterwards for festivities or during warfare. The ornaments would symbolise a severed head.⁸²

Zegwaard, however, did not include any drawings or photographs of what he described there as *owam*.

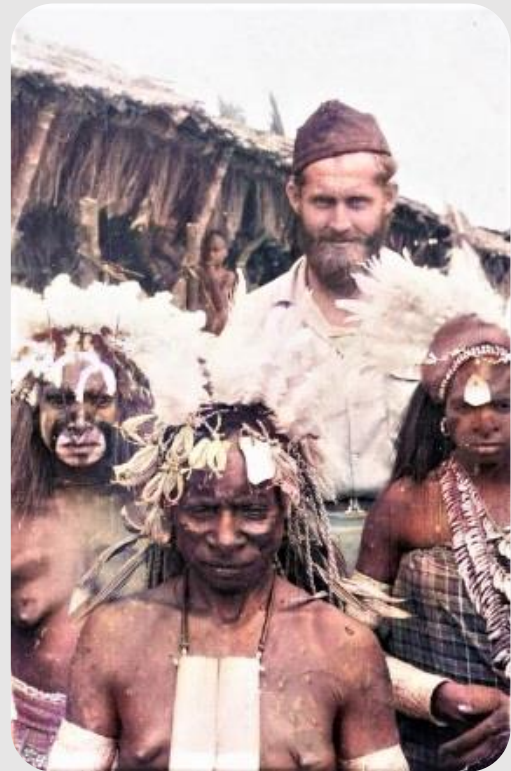


Fig. 18

Gerard A. Zegwaard

The woman in the middle is wearing an owam

Recently colored photograph

Original photo before 1955

Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE), NL

⁸¹ Jan Boelaars, *Met Papoea's samen op weg: Deel III: De begeleiders* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1997), 17

⁸² Gerard A. Zegwaard, "Headhunting Practices of the Asmat of Netherlands New Guinea", *American Anthropologist* volume 61, issue 6 (december 1959): 1022

Pictures, however, are found in some notes from the fifties, specifically in the chapter titled *Het Snellen* (“*Headhunting*”). Zegwaard wrote, in Dutch, about “the main attribute” *owam* and distinguished the *owam-nas*, *owam-pa* and *bakar-owam*.

How the confusion with the Yahray's decorations arose we will never fully know, but that they are completely different ornaments is hopefully now clear.

The types of *owam* described by Zegwaard are in my opinion incomplete. Since, when looking at old photographs of the Asmat, there is a great variety of bamboo chains that seem to belong to the same type of ornaments.



Fig. 19

Recently colored photograph of an Asmat man

*Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE),
NL*

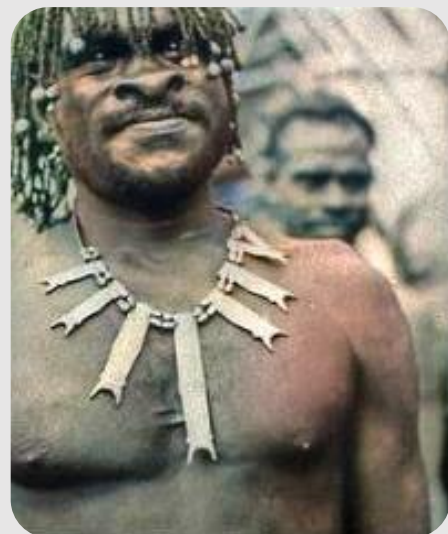


Fig. 20

Recently colored photograph of an Asmat man

*Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE),
NL*

... but that's for another story ...

Consulted decorations of the Yahray in museums

From the collection	Inventory number	Described region of origin
Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac	71.1967.55.1	Asmat
Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac	71.1967.21.2	Asmat
Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac	71.1969.123.1	Asmat
Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac	PP0103882	Asmat
Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac	PP0103226	Asmat
Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac	PP0103225	Asmat
National Museum of World Cultures	TM-2682-12	Mappi area
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-46679	Mappi area
National Museum of World Cultures	TM-2492-59	Digul area
National Museum of World Cultures	TM-2834-14	Mappi / Digul area
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-33975	Asmat / Auyu
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-39628	Asmat / Auyu
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-39629	Asmat
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-39630	Asmat
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-41180	Asmat
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-47675	Asmat
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-51533	Asmat
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-51534	Asmat
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-51535	Asmat
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-71243	Central Asmat
National Museum of World Cultures	TM-2281-16	Muyu
National Museum of World Cultures	RV-3070-170	Auyu
National Museum of World Cultures	TM-2482-20	Auyu
National Museum of World Cultures	TM-2492-60	Auyu
National Museum of World Cultures	TM-2563-44	Auyu
National Museum of World Cultures	TM-2482-19	Auyu
National Museum of World Cultures	WM-39382	Yahray / Yaqay
National Museum of World Cultures	TM-3276-3	Yahray / Yaqay

The honorary decorations with inventory numbers WM-33975 and WM-39628 list "Auyu" as the culture of origin, but refer to "Asmat. Leben mit den Ahnen" (1981).

As can be seen in the table above, the collections consulted almost systematically refer to the wrong people. One looks mainly in the direction of Asmat and the Awyu.

As described earlier, this was probably based on Zegwaard's work to make the link to Asmat.

On top of that, the decorations in the Parisian *Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac* are consistently described as *ornement de poitrine*, meaning *breast ornament*. Moreover, the description of several specimens, such as the piece with inventory number 71.1967.21.2 that is exhibited in the museum, even reads:

*"Such adornments would have been worn by warriors during ceremonies. They are said to evoke the vitality of men in connection with headhunting. The whole ornament could represent a male gender and the number of pieces of bamboo, extended with feathers, is sometimes described as being proportional to the number of enemies defeated. According to the report of the Musée de l'Homme, the seeds and feathers are the prerogative of victorious warriors."*⁸³

A correct description would be: *"One of the decorations of the Yahray, called Tok, for a warrior who had killed at least 12 enemies. This decoration was officially awarded during the pig feast, called batik-jamé, and was worn around the neck, hanging down on the back. The bamboo lath symbolizes the knife used to decapitate victims. The two braided discs are called pao, and symbolize a headhunting basket, called kud. This basket was used to carry the severed head to the men's house. Equipped with a carrying strap and decorated with feathers and seeds."*

Boelaars is also very clear about the Awyu. Even though they were a neighbouring people to the Yahray, they did not have an order of honour. Boelaars wrote this clearly on p. 217 of his book *Met Papoea's samen op weg. Deel 2: De baanbrekers* from 1995.

I hope that with this text I have been able to clarify matters.

After all, "credit where credit is due"...

in this case to the... **Yahray.**

Niels Beckers, September 2021

⁸³ <https://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/explorer-les-collections/base/Work/action/show/notice/19625-ornement-de-poitrine/page/1/> Inventory number: 71.1967.21.2 Translated from French

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https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/50748601541/in/album-72157634173933992/
- https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/
- National Museum of World Cultures: collectie.wereldculturen.nl
- Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac: <https://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/explorer-les-collections/>

Photographs

Thanks to Klaas Schoof; Papua Heritage Foundation (PACE), the Netherlands

www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures - www.papuaerfgoed.org

&

National Museum of World Cultures, the Netherlands

<https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl>

Fig.1:

https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/48096660232/in/album-72157709081558226/

Fig.2:

Foto door Niels Beckers van eigen collectie

Fig.3:

https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/33364542058/in/album-72157709081558226/

Fig.4:

<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/506199>

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Fig.5:

https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/48699982327/in/album-72157687494243174/

Fig.6:

https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/48069016333/in/album-72157709081558226/ (cropped) 1951 - 1956

Fig.7:

https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/48077742727/in/album-72157709081558226/ 1951 - 1956

Fig. 8:

https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/48074047057/in/album-72157709081558226/ 1951 - 1956

Fig.9:

<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/1094188>

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Fig.10:

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Fig.11:

https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/49900539687/in/album-72157682868195763/ (cropped)

Fig.12:

Photographed by Niels Beckers, personal collection

Fig.13:

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Fig.14:

<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/720054>

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Fig.15:

Photographed by Niels Beckers, personal collection

Fig.16:

https://www.flickr.com/photos/papuan_cultures/48069016333/in/album-72157709081558226/ 1951 - 1956

Fig.17:

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Fig.18:

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Fig.19:

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Fig.20:

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