
THE AMUNGME
OF WEST NEW
GUINEA

NEW GUINEA COMMUNICATIONS

Volume 9

KAL MULLER

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NEW GUINEA
COMMUNICATIONS
A SERIES

The aim is to provide a conduit for the publication of studies on the Island of New Guinea, with its two established political divisions, but will also include other associated patterns of islands.

It will enable contributions from new knowledge workers—with their dissertations—and from established scholars. As there are numerous scholars who would like better coverage of the areas in which they have explored—as a tribute to the people they have worked with—as well as local scholars who understand the importance of their unique areas. It is felt that the approaches being trialed in the visual anthropology part of the series as area studies will bring a wider attention to the remarkable nature of the island.

The first volumes will be on modes of communication: oral history and folklore, and the emergence of a local literature. While the representation of all disciplines is welcome, comparative and whole island studies would be of great interest as well. For this, collaborative works or edited volumes may be needed.

It will allow for academic publications of a more preliminary kind—rather than exhaustive monographs, which are becoming more and more impossible to produce.

Where is the knowledge we have lost?

John Evans
SERIES DEVELOPER
BOOK2BUK2PLES LTD.

P R E F A C E

This book on the Amungme continues our coverage of the most important ethno-linguistic groups in the highlands of West New Guinea (WNG). The first volume, covering the Me-Moni-Wodani, started with the three groups at the westernmost area of WNG's central highlands. After the Amungme, the next volume will describe the Lani (or Western Dani) and the Dani of the Baliem Valley. The depiction of the Yali-Mek-Ok groups completes the series, covering the easternmost WNG highlands, to the border with Papua New Guinea (PNG).

The fortune or misfortune of the Amungme tribe stems from the presence of the huge mining company, Freeport Indonesia operating on a part of their territory.

The Amungme area was the base for much of my fieldwork. I also relied heavily on the writings of several authors on the Amungme: the Ph.D. dissertations of Carolyn Cook, and John Ellenberger, a book by Arnold Mampiooper, and several texts by Tom Beanal. I also conducted various interviews with Pak Tom as well as other Amungme leaders and individuals. The word '*pak*' (father) is the polite Indonesian way to refer to a respected older man. It corresponds roughly to our Mr.

Note that each of these authors sometimes spells Amungme words and place names differently, as there is no accepted standardized spelling for the language. I have followed the Indonesian sounds/spelling system as much as possible.

Pak Tom recommended that I work with Yunus Omabak, a traditional Amungme leader, for all the cultural and traditional aspects of this book, plus the checking of all the facts to make sure of their accuracy from an Amungme point of view. This was an excellent choice, as Yunus Omabak is a well-known and respected figure among his people. Pak Yunus was my

main interpreter and friend throughout the compilation of this book. Other Amungme informants generously supplied me with considerable material, all in the Indonesian language.

Pak Yunus accompanied me on many treks from various villages and arranged meetings for me with Amungme sources. I spent many days at his home in the highlands village of Opitawak, some of the time with my wife Jina. Pak Yunus' fine and helpful two older sons also aided in presenting and checking my texts. These were first translated into Indonesian, then corrected and approved by Pak Yunus. He was of invaluable help and his comments made me feel more secure obtaining accurate information for this book.

Most of the text in this book was written in 2001. The history ends in the late 1990s. Many aspects of life have gotten better for the Amungme since this book was written. The relations with the military, the police, and Freeport security personnel have improved somewhat. Various Freeport programs have made a tremendous positive difference in the lives of some (but by no means all) of the Amungme. These programs have been aimed at those Amungme whose lands have been the most affected by Freeport's activities: those living in the Waa, Tsinga, and Arowanop valleys.

The recent programs include a multi-million-dollar Trust Fund, the company-sponsored move to the lowlands for those willing, also scholarships, financial help for the various churches, and the Nemangkawi Institute for training workers in sought-after skills like mechanics, heavy equipment operations, and underground mining skills. The one percent fund, called LPMAC, has improved considerably in the efficiency of its distribution of many millions of dollars every year to the Amungme as well as to other Papuan groups living in the Timika area. Many more Amungme have obtained jobs with Freeport, including in the higher-paying staff categories.

On the negative side, the influx of thousands of gold-panners and other immigrants has put the Amungme living in the Waa valley, as well as around Timika, into a minority. Tribal wars continue to take Amungme lives, but fortunately, no firearms are brought into play.

The first 12 chapters in this book cover the most important traditional aspects of Amungme culture. This information is well known to middle-aged and older men still living in the highlands but has increasingly been lost to the younger members of the Amungme group, especially those living in the lowlands. The older generation of Amungme leaders feels that the facts given in these chapters are an essential part of their culture and should be well known by everyone, including non-Amungme.

The second part of the book, the last five chapters, covers the historical events from 1950 to the late 1990s. I have tried to present the various incidents from both the Amungme's as well as the outsiders' points of view. Unfortunately, there have been a number of problems and conflicts between the Amungme on one side with Freeport and the Indonesian government on the other. Much of this can be attributed to the outsiders' lack of understanding and appreciation of the Amungme culture and their way of looking at relationships. I very much hope that this book will help the Amungme and the non-Papuans understand each other better. This sympathetic knowledge is essential to a mutually beneficial relationship in the future.

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The Kamoro in the lowlands had access to metal long before the highlands Amungme. Rivers are their roads, and canoes are the only means of transportation along rivers and across swamps.



The Amungme occupy seventeen mountain valleys on the south side of West New Guinea's central mountains. Along with the Damal who live on the north side of the mountains, they form a cultural and linguistic group distinct from their neighbors: the Lani to the northeast, the Nduga to the east, the Me and Moni to the north and west, and the coastal Kamoro in the south. No accurate census figures exist, with the approximate figure of 8,000 Amungme and 6,000 Damal being the most frequently quoted estimates.

Culturally and physically, the Amungme are quite distinct from the Kamoro but in most aspects, they closely resemble the other mountain groups. The Kamoro fish, hunt, and gather in an environment rich in food resources. They have ample supplies of protein and tend to be taller than the highlands tribes. The Amungme diet is based on sweet potato, taro, and greens with game being scarce. Domestic pigs are only consumed during infrequent rituals. As with the other mountain groups, they are short of stature, with the men having thick, piston-like thighs from continuously climbing up steep slopes.

The Kamoro, especially those living around Etna Bay and to the east of it, have had several centuries of contact and trade with the outside world. The Dutch government and the Roman Catholic Church established a permanent presence in the central Kamoro area during the mid-1920s. In contrast, the Amungme, had but a few steel ax-heads out of the Stone Age. They never had any earlier contacts with the non-Papuan world, until the first European expedition, led by Wollaston, trekked up the Tsinga Valley to the bottom of the 'hanging' glacier at the head of this valley. The Colijn expedition quickly crossed their lands in 1936 on their way to the glaciers and Nemangkawi (now called the Puncak Jaya area by outsiders) as the highest peak between the Himalayas and the Andes at 4,884 meters. The Amungme remained an essentially Stone Age culture until the early 1950s when the first missionaries visited their homeland.

Changes in Kamoro-land, material and psychological, were relatively gradual. But the Amungme experienced rapid and often traumatic disruptions to their traditional lifestyle. Within a decade of the first missionary contacts, over two thousand Amungme migrated to the lowlands, to the Agimuga area, under the encouragement of some of their leaders, the Dutch government, and the Catholic Church. Many of them died of malaria due to the neglect

At 4,884 meters, Nemangkawi Ningkok holds the record for the highest mountain between the Himalayas and the Andes. Called Puncak Jaya in Indonesian, it was formerly known as Carstensz Peak.

