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HEADS FOR FORCE: ON THE HEADHUNTING COMPLEX IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND MELANESIA

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The practice of headhunting in certain tribal societies was widely covered in the reports of early travellers, missionaries and colonial administrators. Together with cannibalism, headhunting served in Europe especially in the 19th century to emphasize the assumed cruelty and inferiority of the cultures involved compared with Western "civilization". Putting an end to these practices, by way of colonization and christianization, made part of the "white man's burden" — and was at the same time a welcome pretext for that white man's imperialistic activities.

Notwithstanding, reports about headhunting those days were devoured by a great public, which was found (as it is today) of exotic horror stories. It seems that other forms of cruelty, torture and atrocity to which man subjects his fellow human beings have never evoked the same "morbid interest and fascination" (cf. Wagner 1972: 148).

The aim of this article, however, is not to horrify the readers, but to analyze headhunting following an anthropological approach.

The essence of headhunting is a situation of war, or raiding, in which the victors take the heads of their slain enemies. These heads are then carefully preserved, and usually put on display in some way. Most common were those forms in which the hard and imperishable part of the human head, the skull, was preserved and displayed. This was the practice in Southeast Asian and Melanesian headhunting

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societies, which are the subjects in this article.

Headhunting practices may seem to be just symptoms of the presumed violent, aggressive and blood-thirsty character of the societies in question. But to be sure, aggressiveness is not confined to these societies. The question remains: what was it that made exactly human heads so important, that warriors risked hazardous situations just to chop these off, and take these with them? In trying to answer this, headhunting has to be placed in its social and cultural context. In the following pages the relationship with especially the religious and political spheres will be analyzed, concisely and tentatively.

What is there in the head?

One of the first classical anthropological texts in which headhunting is discussed, is "the Golden Bough" by J. G. Frazer, dating from the end of the 19th century. In this book the author selects two societies of the Southeast Asian culture area¹ for his illustrative cases, the first of which follows here:

"The natives of Bontoc in the interior of Luzon [...] are passionate head-hunters. Their principal season for head-hunting are the times of planting and reaping the rice. In order that the crop may turn out well, every farm must get at least one human head at planting and one at sowing. The head-hunters go out in twos or threes, lie in wait for the victim, whether man or woman, cut off his or her head, hands, and feet, and bring them back in haste to the village, where they are received with great rejoicings. The skulls are at first exposed on the branches of two or three dead trees which stand in an open space of every village surrounded by large stones which serve as seats. The people then dance round them and feast and get drunk. When the flesh has decayed from the head, the man who cut it off takes it home and preserves it as a relic, while his companions do the same with the hands and the feet. Similar customs are observed by the Apyaos, another tribe in the interior of Luzon." (Frazer 1978: 570)

¹ The Southeast Asian culture area is geographically located between China and India. Though it contains many different ethnic groups and cultures, some basic characteristics are present in virtually each of them. See e.g. Reid 1988, especially p. 3-7.

In this case, headhunting obviously makes part of the religious complex. The severed human heads play a ritual role — they are necessary for the performance of ceremonies, such as those related to the agricultural cycle. As a matter of fact, headhunting is almost always intimately related with fertility and prosperity, also in the sense of the well-being of a community. In several societies, the foundation of a new village was usually accompanied by a headhunting raid. Among the Minahasans of North Sulawesi (Celebes), for example, the skulls seized at that occasion were buried in the central square of the new settlement, next to the sacred stones which had also been located there at the time of the foundation, with other symbolical objects. These skulls, and the ground surrounding them symbolized a combination of power and divine favour. They were referred to as the "welfare and strength of the village" (Adriani 1932, 2: 312; cf. Schwarz 1907, *verfalling*: 201; Schwarz 1908a: 131). Up until the present day, it is customary for people who leave the village to take some earth from the vicinity of this holy place with them.

In fact, in many Southeast Asian and also Melanesian villages the store-place of the skulls was, and sometimes still is, a central point of reference. The human rests are often displayed in a conspicuous way, for instance suspended from the ridge pole of special buildings, such as the local assembly hall. (e.g. Scardueli 1990: 460; Nooy-Palm 1986: 315).

Among the Land Dayak of Borneo, the "head house" is the most eye-catching building in a village. It is a reference point, the centre for religious and social organization, and the sleeping area of adolescent boys and unmarried men (Geddes 1954: 21). Presumably it is expected that this proximity to the remains of slain enemies will give them strength.

Anyway, this group of Dayak is much less a "warrior race" than their famous neighbours, the Iban or Sea Dayak, who have established a firm reputation as fierce headhunters².

² One of the best-known societies of anthropological literature, due to the excellent ethnographies — focusing on social organization and agriculture — of Derek Freeman (1955, 1970, 1981). See for the Iban e.g. Wagner 1972; Matheson 1985; Pringle 1967; Graham 1987; Gibson 1990.

Among the latter, as well as among various other societies, not just communal rituals required severed heads, but also rituals of a more personal character, such as funeral ceremonies for eminent persons. A head was needed to break off mourning, and to restore the cosmic balance (Wagner 1972: 138). Similar customs existed in Minahasa (Mangindaan 1873: 366-367; Pietermaat 1833: 66-67). In Minahasan languages, the very same term might have the double meaning of "going on a headhunting raid" as well as "being in mourning"³.

Thus, headhunting was often not undertaken just an expression of aggressiveness or not even in the context of an existing war, but in a ceremonial framework.

Now, the question arises: what is so specific about a human head? For an analysis, we will first recur to some concepts which are central in the South Pacific and the Southeast Asian culture areas, respectively.

In South Melanesia, an appropriate concept is that of mana: magical power derived from the spirits. Firth wrote about this concept: "...it belongs to a pragmatic context, and is associated with such matters as propitious fishing, an abundant crop, the cure of sickness etc... Success and efficacy are proof of the mana of the chief and of the favour of gods and spirits." (Firth 1940, cited by Van Baal 1971: 66)

According to Melanesians, for example the Solomon Islanders, a human head is the repository of mana. But there is a scale to the amount of mana, depending on the sort of head (Tippett 1967: 9). Few mana was in a pig's head, more already in that of a woman; then followed commoners, warriors, chiefs. The white man's head was considered to contain the most mana of all; we may be surprised that most of the early Europeans visitors to these regions survived their contacts with these societies!

In Southeast Asian cultures, a comparable but slightly different concept exists, usually denominated "soul-stuff" or "soul-substance" (in Dutch zielestof). This concept had been introduced in 1906 by A. Kruyt, a Dutch missionary working among the Toraja of Central

³ In the Tontemboan language, ngasi and its derivations of mengasi, pinangasi and pangasian. (see Schwarz 1908:281).

Celebes. It refers to the belief in a cosmic energy which imbues the world and which is separable from the objects — living beings and lifeless objects — in which it is present. (Kruyt 1906). The idea of such an energy is indeed widely spread in continental and insular Southeast Asia, though the concept of "soul-substance" as defined by Kruyt is by far not nearly applicable everywhere. (see e.g. Wolters 1982: 101-104).

According to Kruyt, people think that the soul-substance is present in the head in particular, and that would provide an appropriate explanation for headhunting: "Soul-substance" as well as "mana" would thus be intermediary factors to explain the power of a head⁴.

Also the perishable parts of a head were often considered to have a positive effect. Among the Toraja of Central Celebes, the "scalp of a head that was taken would be placed in a durian or coconut tree to cause it to produce a superabundance of fruit." (Nooy-Palm 1986: 318)

Sometimes the consumption of parts of the heads was also considered beneficial. A form of cannibalism was then practised to acquire some of the "power" symbolized by severed heads. When they were cooked — as part of the preparation process — the fleshy parts might be eaten, or the extract be drunk. In Minahasa on the eve of a large-scale war, a head was sometimes taken especially to provide the warriors-to-be with powerful nourishment (Padbrugge 1866: 318; Pietermaat 1833: 68; Hickson 1889: 216). In Timor, the headhunter at times ate part of the brains, or of the neck muscle, "in order to absorb the enemy's smanaf or vital force." (Schulte Nordholt 1971: 350). Among the Toraja, the water in which the head was cooked was given as a medicine to sick children (Nooy-Palm 1986: 318).

In the Melanesian culture area, cannibalism was a more routine part of the headhunting practices (e.g. Boelaars 1981: 271; Tippett 1967: 9).

⁴ Needham (1976) questions the value of this analytical ("etic") explanation, since in the folk ("emic") model people as a rule mention quite different motives. They would probably point to a direct relationship between headhunting and prosperity, but even more likely they would give as a motive that headhunting is a tradition from the ancestors which one should observe, under penalty of severe sanctions. Nobody would mention the alleged "inner force".

The hunter

Apart from the ritual context, we should pay attention to the political motives for headhunting. In achievement-oriented, fairly egalitarian societies such as those of the Iban and the Minahasans, headhunting was a principal means of attaining a higher status and positions of power.

The successful headhunter could be assured of an increase in prestige. Many folk tales from various regions have a renowned headhunter as their main hero. The warriors did their utmost to emphasize their successful enterprises later on. The most eye-catching was the organization of a private ritual, which might take the form of a huge, complex feast. (e.g. Beatty 1991 and Scardueli 1990: 459-461 for Nias; Freeman 1981: 40 for the Iban; Nooy-Palm 1986: 326 for the Toraja). In Minahasa, in addition, headhunters suspended the skulls in their veranda — and also other parts of human bodies, as well as the pots in which the heads had been cooked. (Padtbrugge 1866: 318).

Headhunters often had a special attire, such as the splendid outfit described by Schulte Nordholt (1971: 340-341; figures 2; 30) for Timor and by Nooy-Palm (1986: 315; figures 51-55) for the Toraja. However, these were presumably only worn during the rituals preceding and after the raid, as they seem rather awkward for use during a hazardous raid in the dense forest and sloping terrain such as those existing in those regions. (but: see Schulte Nordholt 1971: 347)

Usually, there were also exclusive outfits or body decorations by which the successful headhunters could attest to their deeds later on. The Iban headhunters could have their hands tattooed (Freeman 1981: 40). Among the Minahasans, wearing the colour red was an exclusive prerogative for former warriors, and they used to tattoo representations of human heads on their own and their wives' bodies. Special hats, staffs with the hair of victims attached to them, necklaces with human teeth: they all attested to the head-hunter's enterprises (Padtbrugge 1866: 317-318; 328; Schmeltz 1889; Hickson 1889: 216, fig. 31.)

It was thus not just for their special "inner force" but also because of their eventual "political use" that heads were coveted: they might,

as a trophy, increase the prestige, influence and power of the headhunter in his community. Hairs and teeth were usually divided among the participants in a head-hunting expedition, so as to leave each of them with a proof of the victory⁵. However, the fact that someone was in the possession of skulls did by no means imply that he himself had acquired these in a raid. They might very well make part of an inheritance, or have been obtained in another way.

A curious example of Minahasans's anxiety for human resis was an episode during the visit of the Dutch-German scientist Reinwardt to this region in 1821, at the beginning of the colonial era. To welcome him and other highranking Europeans in his company, a group of hundreds of Minahasan men had come together in the coastal village of Tanawangko. In their traditional warrior's outfits they waited for the moment to start with the demonstration of war dances, as part of the welcome ceremony. Suddenly the group transformed into a tumultuous, yelling, terrifying crowd. The cause turned out to be the arrival of some men, who carried with them, on a long bamboo, the severed head of a pirate. The dancers-to-be threw themselves on the head, eager to seize a part of it. Before long, the head was totally torn to pieces. This was much regretted by Reinwardt, who himself wanted to have the head, "... and no matter how much the professor begged the Resident⁶ to take the head under his protection, it was impossible to give any orders to that savage mass. Anyway, it was too late, for the head did not exist anymore." (Bik 1864: 171-172).

This case shows how the same objective (here the obtaining of a human head) may be inspired by considerations which seem irreconcilable: viz the "scientific" and the so-called "primitive-magical". For the individual man, headhunting could still have another motive. In many a society participation in such a raid was considered part of an initiation ritual. A man often was not considered a man

⁵ This depending on the type of stratification existing in the society and the type of relationship between the partakers in the raid. Elshout (1926: 219-220) records that among the Kenyah Dayak (Borneo), when each of the participants of a raid remained with a part of a skull, with the help of wood each part was completed into a complete skull! Thus, a miraculous multiplication took place.

⁶ Official of the Dutch colonial government.

— and thus, was not entitled to marry — unless he had been on headhunting. In Timor this new status was preceded by circumcision (Schulte Nordholt 1971: 345).

The headhunt

The motive for an expedition, as may be evident from the foregoing, was not always a state of war, but just as often the necessity within the community to perform a ritual for which a head was needed.

The adversaries, the intended victims, were persons belonging to another social and often also ethnic group. The Iban even considered the Punan, the hunter-gatherers who often were their victims, as non-human (MacKinley 1976; Matheson 1985: 127). In Timor the Tetum-speaking Belunese and the Beboki, belonging to different language groups, were almost "natural" adversaries. (Schulte Nordholt 1971: 328; see also 25-26)

The raid was usually accompanied by ceremonies, in which much attention was paid to the auguries, often (such as with the Iban, Toraja and Minahasans) expressed in the cry and flight of certain birds. (Nooy-Palm 1986: 314; Adriani 1932: 487).

A headhunter's reputation was typically that of a "courageous man" but in fact "courage", such as this is defined by the criteria of the western culture, was a quality rarely found among the heroes. As for Minahasa, it was usually people without company who were stalked, or taken by surprise while asleep. (Padbrugge 1866: 319; see also Padbrugge 1682 in Godée Molsbergen 1928: 63). The raiders went by preference to the isolated and sparsely populated regions where they in a less risky way could find victims. Women and children were not spared; they were on the contrary the easiest prey⁷.

An open combat was a rare event in most headhunting societies (cf. Boelars 1981: 142; Elishout 1926: 209), the Iban perhaps excepted. The Kalinga of Luzon changed at times the status of their trade partners into that of headhunter's prey: tricks were used to seize them (Barton

⁷ De Clercq 1873: 526. The Kenyah-Dayak stayed for this purpose often for months in the jungle; their victims were usually the Punan huntergatherers. (Elishout 1926: 241, 245). Also in South Nias (Scarduelli 1990: 459), and among the Toraja (Nooy-Palm 1986: 313), victims were sought after in faraway areas.

1949: 71; 153-155). In Timor, the title for a headhunter was meo, which means "cat", in Tetum and Atoni languages (Schulte Nordholt 1971: 340). This double meaning is related to the ritual role of the cat, but also to the demeanour which was the norm of a headhunter: Just like a cat stalks its prey on velvet feet, so a headhunter should attack his victim by surprise (Schulte Nordholt, personal communication). Indeed, this was the practice in Timor, although folk tales frequently record man-to-man fights and an elaborate war procedure (Schulte Nordholt 1971: 328-333; 346-347).

Life and death, female and male

Headhunting belongs to the male domain. All over the world typically it is men who take life: in war or in hunting. Women, for their part, are the life-givers: not just by child-bearing and nursing, but also in agriculture which in most societies is mainly a women's job. The dichotomy, however, is not absolute. Life and death in the societies under discussion are considered complementary rather than as each other's opposite. Headhunting may seem a practice which merely leads to destruction, but the fact that it is so often linked to fertility rituals is an indication of its significance for new life. The two opposites of life and death need each other, and first life should be sacrificed in order to make new life possible.

Also the role of headhunting in mourning rituals — a human head may be needed to take off the mourning for an eminent person, as among the Iban and Minahasans — means that the deaths of others are necessary to continue life for their own group (Wagner 1972: 141)⁸.

In Southeast Asia we often see an analogy between harvesting (an essentially female activity) and headhunting (basically male). Among the Toraja, men and women in the headhunting rituals are often dressed like, and perform like, members of the opposite sex (Nooy-Palm 1986: 313-314). Also headhunting in itself is — in myths, songs and rituals — considered as a form of harvesting of human heads! (Nooy-Palm

⁸ We also have here the element of balance restoring, usually also considered essential for the agreeable continuation of life.

1980: 172). In the language of the Toraja, for instance, the word for headhunting is mangae and for harvesting manggae. (Schulte Nordholt 1971: 477). Such analogies, and "reversals" of the daily order, are common in various societies in Southeast Asia at the occurrence of headhunting expeditions⁹. The idea that from death springs life refers to agricultural, but also to human fertility, especially in those societies where participation in headhunting was an initiation rite and a prerequisite for marriage. In order to be able to establish the fertile bond between women and men, a life had to be first taken. War and death are conditions for life and marriage. (cf. Van Dijk and De Jonge 1990: 17).

What about the active role of women in headhunting? We have already referred to their participation in the accompanying rituals. Besides that, it seems that women were often the decisive factor in the undertaking. The Iban, reputed for their bravery, in fact often dreaded to start a raid, and then it was the women who needed them and ridicularized the fearful ones. (Wagner 1972: 132). Moreover, it seems that among them headhunting was more or less essential for a marriage bond: "A successful young head-hunter, it is said, could have his pick of the most desirable young women, and was much sought after as a husband. In contrast, a man who had never taken a head, or who was known to be reluctant in battle, would be told by the women he courted: "...First scale the posts of an enemy long-house; first bedeck your hair as does he who has taken a head." (Freeman, quoted by Gibson 1990: 138).

Present-day headhunting

In all the societies that have been just mentioned, headhunting

⁹ We see this analogy between war and harvest also among e.g. the Aomi of Timor (Schulte Nordholt 1971: 422; 344 "The fertility of the soil and the domestic fire belong to the feminine category. Therefore the work of the [...] man is in a sense feminine — it is a special kind of harvesting. That is why there is an apparently total reversal of the usual order in warfare"), on the island of Sumba (Schulte Nordholt 1971: 477-478), and among the Babarese (Van Dijk and De Jonge 1990: 15-17). Among the Iban, "the cult of head-hunting emphasizes the symbolic equation of trophy heads, acquired by men, with both biological and agricultural fecundity" (Graham 1987: 106, referring to Freeman 1979).

belongs to the past since some moment in the 19th or early 20th century, when colonial governments with their superior armed forces succeeded in suppressing these practices.

However: is this really true? When I lived among the Minahasans in the early 1980, viz. more than a century after the last reported head-hunts there (De Clercq 1870: 526), I occasionally witnessed in the inland villages unrest and worry. Rumours were circulating that children had been kidnapped, in order to bury their heads under the big hydraulic works which were being constructed in an area nearby. Intrepid young men, then, went with a lot of fuss into the forest in search of the presumed assaulters. Did they believe those rumours, or was it just a way to impress the girls and other fellow-villagers? Anyway, this kind of rumour was not exclusive for Minahasa. Naipaul (1982: 281) was confronted with the same kind of stories during his journey through Malaysia, and Geddes (1954: 22) records the belief among the Land Dayak of Borneo that in order to complete a large bridge, the authorities needed heads to be buried there. Fear for outsiders — since they are still now considered potential headhunters — until the present day is in some areas hampering so-called development projects (cf. Endicott 1983: 237).

We may, however, fairly assume that systematic headhunting belongs to the past. But this is not the case with the "headhunting complex". It has been argued in the foregoing that headhunting is no isolated phenomenon, but is rather the core of a cluster of beliefs, rituals and accompanying customs. The abolishment of this custom could thus nowhere be an easy process, neither for the authorities nor for the participants. There was sometimes, in colonial times, a new explosion of headhunting raids (e.g. Schulte Nordholt 1977: 163-164, regarding the island of Adonare — near Flores — in 1934).

W. H. R. Rivers has argued that the prohibition on this practice may have serious effects for the participants. According to his findings, among many Melanesian peoples it was one of the factors which led to a cultural void and so to a loss of interest in life, which was expressed by e.g. a decrease in marriages and an increase in abortions. He was certainly right in pointing to the central role of headhunting in the world view, and in the organization of life for indigenous people.

(Rivers ed. 1972: 93; 101-102; 106-109).

Other ethnic groups have reacted in different ways to the banning on headhunting. Among the Minahasans this impediment has been a decisive factor in the process of mass-conversion to christianity. And in many societies the rituals originally accompanying headhunting are still practised. A recent research among a Central Sulawesi people records and interprets rituals and songs which belong to a context of headhunting but now are still known and performed, although on a minor scale. (Martin 1989). After the prohibition on raids, rituals were usually still proffered, with the use of old skulls, or substitutes, such as coconuts, or deer heads. (MacKinley 92-93; Van Dijk and De Jonge 1990: 8; Nooy-Palm 1986: 316).

Besides the ritual motive, we have argued that there was another ground for headhunting, viz. individual prestige-seeking. This has since the abolition of headhunting found some outlet in the opportunities and defies which are offered by the changing world. For these societies the colonial rule, and the later integration into a modern state, have provided an increase in scale and a widening of perspectives. Education, the enlistment in the army, new jobs, opportunities for travelling and the acquiring of luxurious goods may serve as alternatives to attain prestige. They are not easily to obtain for the "common man" but they are certainly things to strive after. It is perhaps not accidental that in Indonesia, to mention an example, the ethnic groups with a past as headhunters manifest themselves as precisely the most eager for education and out-migration.

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