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# Destroying the graven image

## Religious iconoclasm on the Christian frontier

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Fig. 1. A siluwang or spirit grove in Pakantan, Batak, Sumatra, about 1900, shortly before it was acquired and destroyed by a Lutheran missionary. From Thiessen 1914.

You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. *Exodus 20, 1-4*

While researching the movements of ethnographic artefacts from Dutch and Belgian colonies to Europe, through the hands of colonial officials, military personnel, planters, dealers and ethnologists as well as, importantly, missionaries (Corbey 2000), I was struck by the fact that the latter not only collected but also destroyed indigenous cult objects. There are even cases of missionaries who picked out the finest specimens from piles designated for burning, and sent the selected objects to Europe for sale, or for display in museums.

In this article I focus on the destruction of images on the Christian frontier in European colonies, and more specifically on the matter of agency – who did what and why. The stereotypical perception is that it was the missionaries who burned or otherwise destroyed native paraphernalia, but it turns out that native initiatives were also involved, and were often even the dominant factor, in these actions. Native iconoclastic practices could be provoked by the colonial situation, as in the case of cargo cults, but could also be part of pre-colonial, purely indigenous traditions. Often, as I show below, these various forms of agency were so entangled that it is difficult to sort them out, all the more so because of the scarcity, brevity and biased nature of source material, which usually has to be culled, with much effort, from missionary archives and periodicals.

Recent scholarship stresses native agency – local agendas, initiatives and creativity – in colonial contexts (O'Hanlon & Welsch 2000; cf. Corbey 2002, Schefold & Vermeulen 2002), criticizing the earlier tendency to see local people as passive recipients of Western influences. This issue is also germane to discussions about cultural

property. All too often it is automatically assumed that the rightful home of the ethnographic artefacts now housed in Western collections is their original context. Many were indeed taken by theft or force, but matters were often more complex, with natives themselves taking the initiative to exchange, sell, donate or simply dispose of their sacred belongings of their own free will.

It has not proved easy to find source material related to iconoclasm in the colonies, and as yet it appears that there has been little analysis of such material. The following, then, is intended as an exploration and inventory of relevant cases and analytical perspectives. First I present a series of cases of missionaries destroying native ritual objects, or having them destroyed. Then I analyse some material which shows clear initiatives on the part of natives, sometimes in interactions with Western colonizers, but also in the context of native traditions of disposing of ritual objects once these had served their purpose.

This article deals only with the destruction of indigenous artefacts. The analytical interest here is not so much historical as structural, and I focus more on similarities than on differences between events which are sometimes separated by substantial stretches of space and time. As a result, the how and why of specific diachronic changes in practices of image destruction will remain underexposed. However, often the same missionary societies, congregations or churches were active in various parts of the world, with the same or similar ideologies.

### Missionary initiative

It is hard to deny that many Christian missionaries severely repressed native religious practices, as the following examples show.

Around 1900, the Protestant missionary Johannes Thiessen destroyed several sacred groves in Pakantan, one of the Batak regions of Northern Sumatra. These *siluwang*

Fig. 2-5. Headdresses, amulets, weapons and other indigenous objects being burned in the presence of an American fundamentalist evangelist, Ilaga Valley, western New Guinea, spring 1960. From Anonymous 1960.



(Fig. 1) were inhabited by flying foxes, perceived as being dangerous spirits, and were offered sacrifices by the villagers. Thiessen succeeded 'in acquiring the whole wood with everything inside it, and thus this stronghold of Satan has disappeared from the stage.' He had the wood cut down with axes, 'as Boniface did away with the thunder oak at Wismar,' which took two to three months and was 'crushing, among Muslims as well as Christians' (Thiessen 1914: 6, 9-10).

Some 80 years earlier Joseph Kam and other missionaries of the Nederlandsch Zendeling-Genootschap (Dutch Missionary Society) in the Moluccas (Maluku) had shown themselves even more rigorous, encouraging natives to destroy their sacred things voluntarily, by burning them or throwing them into the sea. On 30 September 1816 a native *guru* (teacher) wrote to Kam that he had spent four days demolishing, among other things, 35 'houses of the Devil' and 15 sago palm groves dedicated to spirits on the island of Haruku (Hustamu 1818; cf. Enklaar 1963). Similar events took place on the island in 1822. Temporary exclusion from Holy Communion and other Christian sacraments was used as an effective punishment for those who refused.

In 1833, Kam's successor August Gericke received word from the Dutch Resident of Saparua about the intensive traditional rituals on that island. Gericke announced that everyone was to be excluded from Protestant services for a full year. The villagers, horrified by this prospect, disposed of their sacred artefacts. A reconciliation followed in which the villagers abjured their spirits, and Gericke preached on *Ezekiel* 14, 6: 'Thus saith the Lord God: Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations' (Enklaar 1963: 104).

On the Marquesas Islands Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries campaigned from the early 19th century against all forms of 'heathen' customs, including songs, dances, native dress, kava drinking and, ironically, each other's ceremonies. The elaborate traditional tattooing, which related to social identity and status as well

as gender roles and sexuality, was emphatically prohibited in 1884. As elsewhere, churches were if possible constructed on what had previously been the site of temples or sacred enclosures, which were thus obliterated. Traditional woodcarvings had to be destroyed or handed over to the missionaries, who either burned them or sent them to museums.

The story was similar in the German colony of Cameroon, where the Basler Mission was active. In 1896-97 near the missionary post of Bombe, in the Bakossi region, the missionary Nathanael Lauffer burned artefacts of the Mungi society in front of the shocked villagers. The society's secret knowledge was desecrated by revealing it to women (Lauffer 1899). 'As a cavalry detachment overwhelms the enemy like a storm,' another missionary from the same area wrote in 1898, 'we have overwhelmed the idols... and taken them prisoner, despite heavy weather' (Keller 1898).

Desecrating secret religious knowledge or sacred objects by showing them to uninitiated individuals was a cunning iconoclastic strategy. More common approaches included burning, dismantling, derision, overturning, cutting up, burying, throwing into the sea, and hiding in caves. Churches and chapels were built over indigenous structures. Confiscation and collecting were two particularly interesting and often contradictory modes of combating indigenous religious practices. Objects might be seized for destruction, or for shipment to museums or home bases in Europe, where they were exhibited in permanent or temporary missionary exhibitions, or sold. In a number of cases ethnographic artefacts were collected with a clear scientific, ethnological purpose; sometimes aesthetic considerations prevailed, but usually there was a mixture of motives which is difficult to disentangle.

An extreme form of combating indigenous religious practices and objects was the expulsion of devils with the help of Roman Catholic rituals. Woodcarvings were whipped to punish them or demonstrate their lack of spiritual efficacy. Human excrement was used in Pangia, Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea in the

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Fig. 6. Indigenous ritual objects at a Protestant missionary post on Alor, Netherlands East Indies, 1930. Items such as that held by the missionary's wife were burned; the rest, mostly representations of the mythical serpent naga, were collected for an ethnological museum in the Netherlands. However, naga are known to have been burned on a considerable scale on this island on other occasions. Photo reproduced by permission of Boeken Kruger Family Archives, Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

early 1960s, where Lutheran evangelists had talked villagers into throwing away their sacred *timbu* and *tapa* stones, believed to be spiritually powerful and dangerous. The evangelists smeared these stones with excrement to degrade them, and explained the fact that the missionaries themselves survived this action as a sign of their own greater spiritual force (Strathern 1981).

### Native agency

The foregoing suggests massive missionary agency. Yet many burnings in the Netherlands East Indies and elsewhere took place at the explicit request of villagers or local chiefs, or at least so missionary publications claim. Even the cases presented thus far are not entirely unambiguous. In one case involving Kam, an earthquake had prompted local people to large-scale destruction of statues and ceremonial buildings by villagers *before* he had arrived, out of fear of God's wrath (Anonymous 1817). A missionary in Cameroon claimed to have burned *Götzenhäuser*, idol houses, 'at the explicit demand of those in charge here' (Lauffer 1899). Here I present a number of cases with clear evidence of native agency.

On Aniwa in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), the Scottish missionary John Paton met with considerable resistance, until in 1868 he discovered the presence of much-coveted fresh water on the island. In the eyes of the native population this amounted to a miracle, and it turned the tide. In a passionate speech, a chief credited Paton's god with providing the fresh water. During the following weeks 'company after company came to the spot, loaded with their gods of wood and stone, and piled them up in heaps, amid the tears and sobs of some... What could be burned, we cast into the flames; others we buried in pits... [or] sank far out into the deep sea' (Paton 1889: 192, 355).

A second case of native agency concerned the Basler Mission in Cameroon, where on 26 October 1934 missionaries publicly exposed cult objects of the Ahon society in Nyasoso in order to desecrate them. The clans who owned the objects distanced themselves solemnly from them and assumed Christianity, but apparently more from political and economic considerations than religious ones. Everyone helped, and everyone was happy. The next day,

in the presence of some 80 baptized natives, many objects were thrown into the river, but only after they had been anointed with the blood of sheep, sacrificed for the occasion at the initiative of the local people. The ceremony was followed by a service (Ntungwa 1935, Balz 1984).

The Marquesas Islands provide another example of the complexities involved in the destruction of images. Suggs, an archaeologist who excavated there in the 1950s, and in the process conducted some valuable ethnographic and historical research, points to 'the nearly complete destruction of the native religious system by Catholicism'. Military and religious authorities forbade 'aboriginal dress, cosmetics, dancing, music and musical instruments, art, tattooing, polygyny, organized religion, adolescent dormitories, nudity, and any overt acts of sexual congress' (1966: 35, 191). But here as elsewhere, processes of acculturation and globalization had commenced through trade contacts even before colonization, and these had also weakened the ceremonies. In the course of the 19th century, the Marquesans had already 'enthusiastically adopted European items of clothing on a completely voluntary basis', and 'wilfully disposed of [traditional] items often, in order to obtain liquor, weapons, or other goods' (*ibid.*: 94, 149).

Melanesian cargo cults of the colonial period were related to the anticipated arrival of material wealth and salvation from heaven or from overseas, through spirits, ancestors or foreigners. There is much controversy over the interpretation of such rites of renewal. Two points are clear, though: that they often involved the ritual destruction of traditional artefacts, in the aspiration to acquire new, modern ones, and that they were clearly the initiative of natives.

An event in the Netherlands New Guinea, in the spring of 1960, revealed elements resembling the features of a cargo cult. Figures 2-5, from a local Dutch Roman Catholic periodical, show a 30-metre-long pile of indigenous objects being burned in the Ilaga Valley. An American fundamentalist evangelist was present at the burning. The villagers, according to the caption in the anonymous source, believed a new era was imminent, offering them personal immortality as well as steel

Figure 7. Pile described as 'heathen attributes and ancestor figures', in Kurudu, Yapen, north coast of Netherlands New Guinea, on 16 October 1930, ready to be burned on the occasion of the solemn baptism of 648 individuals from the surrounding villages (from de Neef 1937: 77). Protestant missionaries are known to have destroyed much in this region, but sometimes saved selected woodcarvings, in some cases handpicking them from the piles.

Anonymous 1817. Uittreksel uit de brieven. *Berigten en Brieven Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap* 2: 32.

– 1820. Oost-Indien. *Berigten en Brieven Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap* 3: 54 ff.

– 1960. Brandstapels in het bergland. *De Tifa: Wekelijks Nieuwsblad voor Nieuw-Guinea*, 5: 23 April.

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Eliade, Mircea 1957. *Das Heilige und das Profane: Vom Wesen des Religiösen*. Hamburg: Rowohlt.

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Hustamu, Isak 1818. Brief der gemeente van Huliliuw. *Berigten en Brieven Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap* 12: 235-236.

Keller, J. 1898. *Kollektivblättern* (Basler Mission) 221: 6.

Küchler, Susanne 1997.

machetes and axes raining from the sky; this suggests their consent to and active participation in the event (Anonymous 1960). A more recent example of such a movement was the Rebaibal – 'revival' – movement in Telefomin, Papua New Guinea, which in the early 1980s systematically pursued the destruction of all the cult houses of the region.

On the other hand, much native agency took the form of fierce resistance to any form of religious renewal. As various chroniclers report, many indigenous leaders and priests in early 16th-century Middle America, for example, hid their sacred figures, drums, mirrors, masks, amulets, oracles, stones, pottery, body adornments and stools from the Spanish conquerors wherever and for as long as they could. An extreme case of resistance was the intentional destruction by Maya priests and chiefs of traditional sacred codices, in order to prevent the Spanish conquerors from handling and polluting them. Nevertheless, thousands of cosmological, historical and mathematical treatises were burnt by the latter.

Another case of resistance was reported by a Dutch anthropologist (personal communication, 1999) who conducted research along the Ramu river in Papua New Guinea in the early 1970s. There he met a European Roman Catholic priest who himself broached the subject of the sacred flutes which were traditionally used in ancestor cults. The priest somewhat provocatively, as if expecting the subject to be raised, claimed responsibility for the burning of these flutes. The anthropologist subsequently found out that the villagers had secretly removed and preserved the most important parts of the flutes – the attached wooden masks.

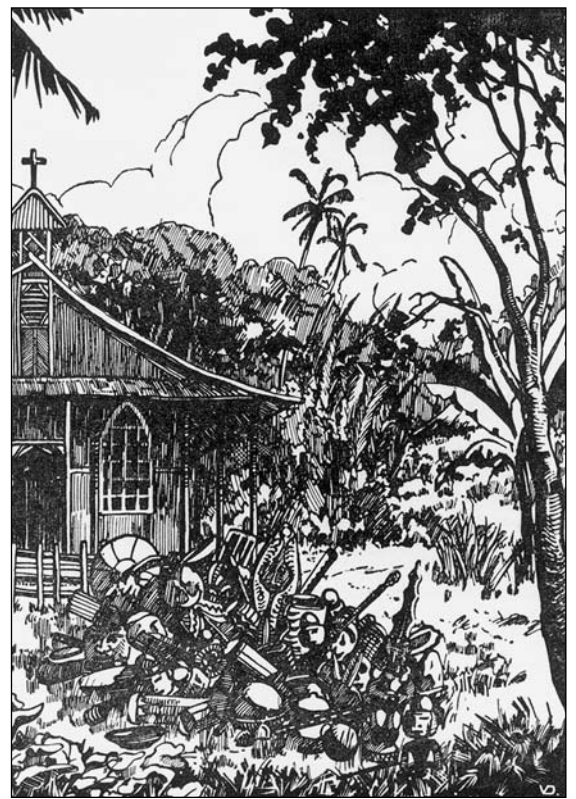
### Native traditions of disposal

A further complication in analysing ritual disposal in missionary contexts, in addition to the mix of missionary and indigenous initiative, is that in many native traditions ritual objects have or had their own life cycle, of which destruction or desecration forms an essential part. The objects are disempowered by burning them, leaving them to rot in the forest, exposing them to termites and so on. This can prevent them from winding up in the wrong hands, becoming too numerous, or playing tricks upon humans when no longer looked after carefully. Asmat *mbish* poles in southwest New Guinea, for example, were traditionally left to rot in the gardens after serving their purpose in feasts. The same was true of *malanggan* ancestor panels and figures on the north coast of New Ireland. The sale of *malanggan* to Western travellers, traders and anthropologists may have served as an alternative strategy of disposal, at the same time providing access to Western goods (Küchler 1997).

Among the KiKongo-speaking peoples along the lower Congo river, many objects were burned by Belgian missionaries and indigenous converts who were often even more rigorous, though it is likely that much more was burned by the followers of indigenous religious or prophetic renewal movements such as Kimbanguism. Such movements have frequently arisen in sub-Saharan Africa through the ages, and, as recent interpretations stress, they are often politically motivated. In more recent times the political manoeuvres of chiefs played a major role, as they outwitted traditional enemies by adopting the religion of mighty newcomers (Vanhee 2000). As in the Melanesian cargo cults, destruction of old objects provides a means of renewal.

### Rituals of Christianization

Two theoreticians of ritual are particularly helpful in understanding these cases of destruction of images: Mircea Eliade and Victor Turner. It was Eliade who devel-



oped the concept of 'cosmicization' for what missionaries, among others, do. According to Eliade, holy places such as Rome, Mecca and Jerusalem were seen as the centre of the world, with a direct link to the divine, ordering and sacralizing what was around them. 'Kosmos', the Greek word for nature or reality, held connotations of order and beauty. What lay beyond the known – in this case, Christian – world was perceived as heathen, barbaric, chaotic and demonic. It had to be purified and incorporated through ritual activities which would order the chaotic, and civilize, purify and domesticate the wilderness, Christianizing it (Eliade 1957). This was achieved by the building of churches, often on native sacred places, the planting of flags, the drawing of maps and boundaries, the erecting of heraldic signs (such as, for example, the Dutch lion), and renaming. Indigenous spiritual beings were often incorporated into Christian iconography by recasting them as devils and demons.

'Cosmicizing' would seem to be a neat description of what missionaries do when they baptize people, or, indeed, burn things indigenous, although Eliade underestimates the role played by those to be converted themselves. Remarkably, native construction workers on the Marquesas Islands, who were instrumental in Christian 'cosmicization' through the building of the churches intended to replace their temples, hid small *tiki* amulets in the brickwork of those churches in the process. Thus they continued an indigenous religious tradition in a new form, and in turn, on a small scale, cosmicized something foreign after their own fashion.

There is something ambivalent in Eliade's approach: on the one hand, he presents the margins as chaotic and in need of order, but on the other he implicitly admits, and rightly so, that they are already structured: they are the domain of the devil, with indigenous statues, places and dignitaries dedicated to him. Sometimes missionaries engaged in the destruction of images proclaimed that native beliefs were empty and their statues powerless, while on other occasions they stressed their demonic, devilish nature and real power, because of the spiritual entities involved. Burning objects or ritually exorcizing the devil may have been activities not so much of ordering the



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- chaotic as of subduing a well-known enemy, and destroying images paradoxically implied recognition of their power at the same time.
- A second viewpoint which sheds light on the process, including the cases of native initiative discussed below, is provided by Victor Turner's well-known theory of 'rites of passage': culturally prescribed actions which accompany changes in social or life cycle states. Such activities usually appear in three principal phases, each of which can be more or less elaborate: rites of separation from the old status (for example, being 'heathen'), a period of being 'liminal' (literally, on the threshold), and reaggregation or incorporation into a new condition (Turner 1974).
- Even without going into detail, it is obvious that several of the cases presented exhibit such features. 'A wonderful deed representing an absolute break with the old,' the Protestant missionary F.J.T. van Hasselt wrote of the burning of a large number of *korwar* ancestor figures on the island of Yapen, Netherlands New Guinea on 16 October 1932 (Fig. 7). This took place during a Protestant service celebrating the baptism of 648 natives. An element of the iconoclastic cosmicization of this particular event was the conferment of new, Christian names to those baptized, replacing the old ones which, according to van Hasselt, were 'ugly and dirty', and too strongly associated with *adat* beliefs in ancestors and spirits (van Hasselt 1933).
- Melanesian cargo cults, with their frequent frenzies of iconoclastic destruction, are also clear examples of rites of passage. In his monograph on religion in Roman Egypt, Frankfurter draws a parallel between such cults and occurrences during the Christianization of Egypt in the fifth century. In both contexts, he writes, enthusiastic collective action 'functions at least temporarily to inaugurate a new ideological order of things, a new cosmos... The participants, the destroyers, thereby move as a body out of their quotidian lives... into a status that is vividly disconnected from the normal world, into what Victor Turner labelled "communitas" in its most radical form' (Frankfurter 1998: 280-281).
- It has been asserted of Roman Egypt, 16th-century Meso-America, early mediaeval Europe, sub-Saharan Africa and Melanesia, among other periods and regions, that indigenous cultures absorbed Christianity rather than the other way around. Patterns of traditional order endured, often inextricably intertwined with Christian elements. Melanesian cargo cults and African renewal movements frequently merged with congenial messianic and millenarian elements of Christianity, and missionaries tended to make strategic use of this to lure natives into their church. This suggests a third analytical concept which may be of use: syncretism. The term is not without conceptual difficulties, for it implies a duality when in fact what is brought into being, on the basis of heterogeneous elements, native and foreign, are integrated unities. The ingredients are brought together in new myths, cults and imagery through the creation of a narrative.
- Destruction of images occurred on a massive scale in 16th-century Meso-America, carried out first by Spanish conquistadors and then by Franciscans who, assisted by indigenous converts, instigated an uncompromising campaign of demolition and purification in the 1520s (Gruzinski 1988). The indigenous temples were cleansed and indigenous ritual art was replaced by Christian imagery. But there was also much syncretistic, 'cosmizing' narrative and pictorial appropriation, adoption and reuse of figures, images, myths, rituals and sacred places, on both sides. The appropriation of cultural and religious idiom was a two-way traffic, with the native 'converts' taking an active role.
- ## Conclusion
- The destruction of images could act as a triumphant symbolic gesture of overthrowing old ways for both missionaries and natives. On the indigenous side, political and economic intentions could add to the complexities of disposal of ritual artefacts. The analysis presented here demonstrates the entanglement and variable character of missionary and local agency in the destruction of images on Christian frontiers, and points to three concepts which may be of help in interpreting such phenomena: 'cosmicization', 'rite of passage', and 'syncretism'.
- Detailed interpretations of the destruction of images in missionary contexts need to address historical specifics and diachronic shifts – a task made all the more difficult by the scarcity and the biased nature of the information available, which is found mainly in missionary sources. Among Roman Catholic missionaries, for example, the 1960s saw a shift from predominantly spiritual concerns towards a greater stress on the living conditions and health of native peoples. It seems that the most drastic actions by missionaries occurred soon after they arrived in a given place, in particular in the case of Protestant denominations. A curious element in the East Indies and elsewhere is that Roman Catholics and Protestants attacked not only native practices but also each other, regularly 'reconquering,' as they themselves often termed it, regions already missionized by the other party.
- The present focus on missionary and native agency in the destruction of images should not draw attention away from the fact that there was often considerable pressure in that direction from government authorities as well. In Indonesia in 1954, for example, a *Rapat Tiga Agama* ('Gathering of the Three Religions', i.e. Islam, Christianity and Hinduism) reinforced the effects of Christian proselytizing with the decree that *arat sabu-lungan*, traditional beliefs, must be eradicated with the help of the police. Everybody was to become either Muslim or Christian within a few months, during which period, indeed, burnings of *adat* items and conversions took place on a considerable scale (Persoon 1994).
- Conversion to Islam of *suku suku yang belum beragama* – groups which do not yet have a religion – has been high on the agenda of the strongly Islam-minded Indonesian *Departemen Agama* (Department of Religion) in recent decades, and schoolteachers and local officials have been instructed accordingly. In 1980-81 all *kerei* – traditional healers – on Siberut, one of the Mentawai Islands, were obliged to stop performing their 'backward' healing ceremonies and relinquish their paraphernalia. Some 240 of them complied, and 'in all of the villages skulls of deer, monkeys, and pigs were burned publicly, as were the *kat-saila* from the *uma*, the central sacrificial site' (Persoon 1986: 232). The same happened among many other *suku suku terasing* – isolated groups – during the same period.
- In addition to a predominantly monotheist religious iconoclasm, ideological and political iconoclasm occurs, exhibiting enough similarities with the former to warrant to some extent a common analysis (cf. Layton, Stone & Thomas 2001). Destruction of images has been practised by, among others, Russian Stalinists, German National Socialists, post-colonial Marxist regimes in Africa, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Red Guards in China. Modernist art itself, targeted by Stalinists and National Socialists, had iconoclastic tendencies, directed against traditional European aesthetic canons. The practice continues: recent examples include the demolition of the giant Buddha statues of the Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan, by the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban, in the spring of 2001, and the massive destruction of images and statues of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in the spring of 2003. ●