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## Death and new life: an intimate relationship

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### Citation

Keurs, P. J. ter. (2022). Death and new life: an intimate relationship. In K. C. Innemée (Ed.), *Papers on Archaeology of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities* (pp. 149-154). Leiden: Sidestone Press. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3719456>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



# THE VALUE OF A HUMAN LIFE

Ritual Killing and Human Sacrifice in Antiquity

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**PALMA 26**

PAPERS ON ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE  
LEIDEN MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES



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PALMA: Papers on Archaeology of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities  
(volume 26)

Published by Sidestone Press, Leiden  
[www.sidestone.com](http://www.sidestone.com)

Layout & cover design: Sidestone Press

Photograph front cover: Tophet de Salammbô, Tunisia by Patrick  
Giraud (CC BY-SA 2.5)

Photograph back cover: Pylon of Medinet Habu by Jacobus van Dijk

Volume editor: Karel C. Innemée

ISBN 978-94-6426-056-4 (softcover)

ISBN 978-94-6426-057-1 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-94-6426-058-8 (PDF e-book)

ISSN 2034-550X

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# Death and new life

An intimate relationship

Pieter ter Keurs\*

## 8.1. Introduction

Among the very few certainties in human life there are two moments that stand out as the most important ones: birth and death, the beginning and the end. The world before birth and after death belongs to the world beyond, a universe we cannot comprehend. When, at the end of the eighteenth century, Western philosophy finally made a clear-cut distinction between what we can observe with our senses and understand with our rational abilities, the empirical world as it shows itself to us, and what we can never understand (the world beyond, or the Kantian *das Ding-an-sich*) the European sphere of influence distinguished itself from many other areas in the world. To many people there is no clear-cut separation between the two spheres, as Western philosophers after Immanuel Kant – such as Arthur Schopenhauer – also quickly recognised.

This balancing act between the known and the unknown stands at the basis of human artistic, symbolic, and religious expression. And creating and guarding a balance in society and in the universe is, apart from coping with the world beyond, a second constant, essential and universal trait of human culture. It is around these two basic human needs, coping with life and death as well as finding a balance in personal and communal life, that this text will develop.

The subject of sacrificing fellow human beings to the gods, hoping for the return gift of new life, is fiercely debated in scholarly literature. Why should one kill and offer the most precious thing we have, life itself, for an uncertain outcome, since we can never be sure of the willingness of the gods to return the gift? To tackle this question we should keep in mind at least four issues that usually tend to blur the discussion. I will focus on the phenomenon of head-hunting, a specific type of human sacrifice. My remarks may therefore be of limited use to other types of sacrifices, but I do think that the basic principles I will discuss are relevant to our attempts to comprehend the general idea of offering life to get new life in return.

Sacrificed human beings are often slaves or enemies, not our closest friends or relatives. There are many examples of headhunting raids, or stories about headhunting raids, aiming to capture enemy heads, which will be ritually transformed to play a meaningful role in ritual practices of the receiving society. This transformation makes the hunted head, the hunter's prey, from something strange that comes from outside the local community into something that supports, and is even essential to, the local community. As Maurice Bloch formulates it, a transformation takes place from *Prey into Hunter* (1992). Taking strangers or slaves as offering to the Gods means that ritualised human sacrifices

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are less disruptive for society than in the case of offering relatives or direct neighbours.

A second issue that should be taken into consideration is the fact that stories about human sacrifices are often exaggerated. The discourse of exchanging life for new life is a very powerful discourse, so even when human sacrifices or headhunting raids do not actually take place, it is important to keep the discourse alive. One does not want to take the risk that the gods will blame people that they actually stopped offering 'real' human beings. It is also clear that headhunting practices and warfare enhance the prestige of men and without the prestige of men and the life-giving force of women there can be no continuation of society. So here as well, one has to keep the stories about headhunting alive to ensure a proper relationship between men and women and the creation of new life.

Apart from pleasing the Gods and enhancing the prestige of men, another reason for spreading around stories about human sacrifices and headhunting is the wish to keep foreign intruders out of the region. Probably, this technique has often been used to keep the European coloniser out, at least for some time.

So, stories about headhunting are more widespread than the actual practice. One can find many examples. Speaking of Kupang, the capital of Timor, Janet Hoskins wrote:

I heard rumors that the new influx of long-haired European and Australian tourists signaled that heads would be taken and used to fortify the building of international hotels.<sup>1</sup>

This is in line with the traditional practice of supporting new houses with hunted skulls to secure prosperity of the house and its inhabitants. I have heard similar stories in the 1990s about the large, new skyscrapers in Jakarta. Here too, the creation of a cosmological balance is crucial for the well-being of future generations.

Finally, we should keep in mind that Western idealism has also sometimes blurred discussions on human sacrifices and headhunting. If one sees 'the other' as an, in essence, good person (the echo of Rousseau) one is not inclined to see the violent aspects of a foreign culture. In addition, since headhunting raids have seldom been documented, some authors have doubts whether they really took place. Sometimes anthropologists are so involved in the societies they study that they are not willing to see the aggressive and violent aspects of the group in which they were so well accepted. It may be that particularly anthropologists who have been trained in the 1960s and the 1970s (in the

context of the student movements stressing social relations based on goodness and lacking dominance and violence) were receptive to such sentiments.<sup>2</sup>

## 8.2. Killing and creating new life among the Asmat

To illustrate how the relationship between taking life and renewing life is seen and ritualised, I will shortly describe some ritual practices of the Asmat of Southwest New-Guinea (now part of Indonesia). Until the 1960s the Asmat were feared as headhunters, by neighbouring groups and by the Europeans (mainly Dutch) who represented the colonial authorities. There was hardly reliable information on Asmat culture available, although Dutch museums already possessed impressive Asmat woodcarvings, collected during a military expedition in the beginning of the twentieth century. It was Major A.J. Gooszen who, in the 1910s, sent large collections to the Netherlands, avoiding the existing regulation which stipulated that collections should be sent to the museum of the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences in Batavia (now the National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta).

Gooszen's collections are still seen as the best Asmat collections in the world and they have stimulated generations of researchers. Adrian Gerbrands, who was very familiar with the Gooszen collections in Leiden, did groundbreaking research on the creativity of Asmat woodcarvers of the village Amanamkai, in 1960-1961. His book *Wow-Ipits* (1967) became a classic in the anthropology of art. Gerbrands showed convincingly that Asmat art can only be understood within the context of Asmat society and he showed that symbolism related to headhunting explained, to a large extent, the choice of designs and the ritual practices in which the carvings were incorporated. For information on headhunting Gerbrands relied heavily on Father Zegwaard, a priest who worked in the area for a long time and published a thoroughly documented article on Asmat headhunting in *American Anthropologist*.<sup>3</sup>

The main reason to practice headhunting was to stimulate fertility and there are indications that the women urged the men to go on a headhunting raid. Gerbrands witnessed and filmed a conflict in Amanamkai with men threatening each other with axes. In the film *Matjemos* (1966) it is clearly visible that the women push the men to show more ferocity. Apparently, some men were not inclined to escalate the conflict, but they were pushed back

1 Hoskins, *Headhunting*, 32.

2 In discussions with colleagues I sometimes encountered fierce, even aggressive, denial of headhunting practices, based on the fact that raids have never been documented in 'their' (meaning the anthropologists') society. Of course this does not mean that they did not take place.

3 Zegwaard, 'Headhunting Practices'.

by the women. Female fertility is only possible when there is male status and prestige, so the women have an interest in urging the men to show the strength and the courage to hunt for preys and to kill.

When Asmat men embarked on a headhunting raid they did not deliberately aim for a victim with a high status. They tried to attack a village by surprise and capture the persons who did not succeed to get away in time. Very often it concerned women or children. The victim lost his or her own name when the head was carried into the village of the headhunters. The victim, the slain enemy, had to be incorporated in the ritual practices that were planned to re-vitalize the village of the headhunters. For this purpose the hunted head received a new identity, with a new name. The prey was welcomed in the village by the women singing and dancing.

Contrary to what early travellers and colonial officers thought, not all skulls in Asmat society were slain enemies. In the men's houses many ancestor skulls were on display. Therefore, the scale of headhunting practices may have been overestimated by early travellers. Photographs of Asmat warriors resting with a skull as a pillow actually show ancestor skulls and not hunted skulls. The difference is clearly recognisable since ancestor skulls still had the lower jawbone and were usually elaborately decorated. Hunted skulls could also be decorated, particularly when they were incorporated in ritual practices and thus in the receiving society, but they always lacked the lower jawbone.

The importance of Asmat headhunting was and is also illustrated and justified in powerful symbolism. Gerbrands documented the role of the *wènet*, the praying mantis, in decorations on woodcarvings.<sup>4</sup> The *wènet* design is found everywhere, which suggests a central role in Asmat thought. Here, it is important to realise that the female *wènet*, in captivity, bites off the head of the male during sexual intercourse. This powerful symbolism – which includes the relationship between death and new life – actually supports headhunting practices in Asmat society and makes it understandable that the *wènet* designs appears on drum handles, canoe prows, spears and many other material expressions.

Examples of this design are not difficult to find in museums collections. A combination of two overlapping *wènet* designs are depictions of ancestors. In addition, the *wènet* looks like a living piece of wood, a walking stick. Note that the term Asmat (As-amat) means 'people of wood'. Fruits on trees are seen as 'the heads of the tree' and fruit eating animals, such as the black cockatoo, are seen as headhunters.

Images of slain enemies are also carved on *bisj* poles, large wooden statues with several ancestor images used



Figure 8.1 Asmat drum. The handle is carved in the shape of a *wènet*. Collection National Museum of World Cultures (NMWC), Leiden, RV 5029-1.

as architectural elements in men's houses or as statues for rituals in which the hunted heads were received in the village. Normally the image of the slain enemy was carved close to the genitals of an ancestor, illustrating the relationship between killing life and renewing life.

All this shows how incrustated headhunting, and its symbolism, is in Asmat society. Even if raids no longer take place, it is important to keep the stories about headhunting alive, because these stories represent essential elements of Asmat life: male prestige and female fertility. Without these two elements, society will not survive. I will show below that this is not only the case among the Asmat. It seems to be a general human phenomenon.

### 8.3. Slain enemies and ancestors

There are indications that victims of headhunting raids are symbolically transformed into ancestors to be able to support society in creating new life, but often this

4 Gerbrands, *Wow-Ipits*.

transformation is not explicitly mentioned.<sup>5</sup> On Enggano island, southwest of Sumatra (Indonesia), there are no stories known about headhunting practices. Yet, there are ample symbolic indications that headhunting used to play a crucial role in Engganese culture in the past.

It is impossible to reconstruct ancient Engganese culture. Apart from the fact that there are no written sources, there was a dramatic population decline in the nineteenth century. It is estimated that there were around 8.000 to 10.000 Engganese people in the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the beginning of the twentieth century there were only 300 left.<sup>6</sup> Part of the population had mixed with migrants from mainland Sumatra or Java, but most people had died from diseases that were imported by Europeans as well as Chinese and Buginese traders. It is likely that particularly smallpox and cholera decimated the population. Although the Dutch colonial authorities sent several researchers and medical doctors to the island to find out what was happening, they were never able to control the situation and to stop the devastating mortality rate. By 1903, when the Protestant Mission arrived, there must have been a general amnesia of a dying culture. In 1994, when I visited Enggano, several informants said that they were now good Christians or Muslims and that they knew virtually nothing about traditional Engganese culture. Yet, based on some stories that have survived, museum collections, and documentation of nineteenth century travellers, we can reconstruct at least something of the old ritual practices.

The book *L'isola delle donne. Viaggio ad Engano* (1894), an account by the Italian traveller Elio Modigliani (1860-1932) about his stay on Enggano Island, is an important source. His work is of significance not only because of what he wrote, but also because of the collection he brought to the Ethnographic Museum in Florence. This is by far the most important Enggano collection in the world.

In the 1930s the German linguist Hans Kähler spent some months on the island. The stories he collected (and published in 1975) also throw some light on Engganese ritual practices, particularly on the *eakalea* (the great feast), a large-scale feast to re-vitalise society involving several villages.<sup>7</sup> Bringing in the hunter's preys was an important part of the *eakalea*.

On Enggano hunters' preys are mostly wild pigs.<sup>8</sup> Even in the 1990s wild pigs were roaming around in the forest and were sometimes frighteningly close by. In one of the

villages I saw a young man heavily wounded after he was attacked by an aggressive pig. And when travelling from one village to another one had to be on the alert constantly, not only for pigs, but also for snakes. In the past, when large amounts of food were necessary for the large-scale feasts, the village square was renamed 'the place where the head is cut off' when the hunters returned from their raids in the forest. The hunters' preys were welcomed by the women who were extensively adorned for the occasion. The women were dancing and threw young coconuts in front of the houses, to stimulate fertility. An important detail is the women's headdresses. These small wooden cylinders usually had a carved image of a slain enemy as main decoration. The headdresses themselves were further decorated with chicken feathers. Several examples of these unique objects have survived in museum collections.<sup>9</sup>

The ritual welcome of the preys, including slain enemies, by the women was not the end of the ceremony. In the middle of the village square there was usually the house of the village leader. These houses are called beehive houses, since the shape resembles a beehive.<sup>10</sup> They were not meant for an extended family, only for a couple with one or maximum two young babies. The houses were too small for more people.

Under the floor of the beehive houses an impressive carving of a slain enemy was attached, to support the house and to symbolically support the community. It is likely that here the slain enemy is transformed into an ancestor who supports the kin group with his or her blessings. Unfortunately we have no ethnographic data to corroborate this hypothesis. It does, however, confirm the important role of the slain enemy in re-vitalising society: the women are adorned with the slain enemy and the houses are supported by the slain enemy. Without such a ritual, in which 'the wild' from outside is brought in and 'civilised' is essential for the well-being of the group. Only by killing life one can guarantee continuation of society's fertility and welfare.

#### 8.4. Headhunting as trope

As mentioned above, stories about sacrificing human beings or headhunting practices are not always factual. However, even as a figure of speech they need to be taken seriously. Even if headhunting no longer takes place it is still important to find a way to enhance male prestige. It is not uncommon to achieve this by showing off. In European society it can regularly be observed,

5 Bloch, *Prey into hunter*; Hoskins, *Headhunting and the Social Imagination in Southeast Asia*.

6 For more information, see ter Keurs, *Condensed Reality. A Study of Material Culture*.

7 Kähler, *Texte von der Insel Enggano*.

8 For more detailed information on ritual practices and house construction on Enggano, see ter Keurs, 'Eakalea. a ritual feast on Enggano Island', *Condensed Reality, and 'Beehive houses on Enggano Island'*.

9 The most impressive examples are in Florence, Leiden and Jakarta.

10 In 1994 these houses no longer existed, although some floorparts were still kept by some families. The last beehive house was probably demolished in, or shortly after, 1903. See ter Keurs, 'Beehive houses on Enggano Island'.



Figure 8.2 An Engganese woman's headdress, with an image of the slain enemy. Collection National Museum of World Cultures (NMWC), Leiden, RV 712-1.

preferably on a beautiful summer's day, that some men (nowadays also women) find a lot of satisfaction in driving ostentatiously in an expensive sports car with open roof.<sup>11</sup> This secures a lot of attention from bystanders and also suggests extensive financial means of the driver: the hunter who brings in considerable wealth. Stories about courageous behaviour during headhunting raids serve similar purposes.

Secondly, aggressive images supported by stories about human sacrifices and headhunting have certainly served to keep out foreigners as long as possible. And they have served this purpose well. The threat of violence has indeed prevented explorers to continue their journeys. This way local populations have successfully kept out European colonisers, at least for some time. A good example is the Central Sumatra expedition in 1877-1879, meant to map the area, both geographically and ethnographically, and to explore the possibility of exploiting the natural resources of the region. At a certain point, however, the expedition members were threatened to be killed if they went on.<sup>12</sup> After ignoring the warning one time they were again

11 See also Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*.

12 See Veth, *Midden-Sumatra*; Ter Keurs, 'Collecting in Central and South-Sumatra', 85-87.

summoned to hold. This time the expedition gave in and changed course.

Farther north on Sumatra, the Toba succeeded to keep the western coloniser out of the area for some decades. Stories about human sacrifices and aggressive warriors were part and parcel of this.<sup>13</sup>

It has already been mentioned above that stories about the necessity of headhunting still roam around in contemporary cities such as Jakarta. In the 1990s, when travelling extensively in several parts of Indonesia, I was twice, jokingly, reminded that this was the time to kill the foreigner (me): once on Ambon, while talking about Seram, and once on Enggano Island. In both cases I was in an isolated situation, with limited transport opportunities. I was the ideal victim. I did not feel threatened for a moment, because I knew the people who made these remarks well and considered them to be my friends. However, I can imagine how these stories may have impressed and influenced early travellers and colonial officers. It can be very uncomfortable to be alone in a hut in the forest, surrounded by strange noises and threatening warriors.

## 8.5. Concluding remarks

Although the separation between male and female worlds has blurred in contemporary society, we can still recognise the basic principles that are important for rituals related to human sacrifices and headhunting practices. The hunt for status and prestige and to be recognised as a successful person is more alive than ever. I already mentioned the sports car driver, but there are many other examples to give. People who search for the right person for a, usually high-level, job are called headhunters. They are after your head, to be incorporated in a new job environment, to fertilise it. In films and advertising sexuality and human fertility are stressed again and again. One does not need to search long for examples. We are constantly overwhelmed by these types of images: usually powerful male and seductive female characters. Only when these two elements are brought together society can flourish.

It seems to be a general human phenomenon to stress prestige and fertility as essential elements for society's continuation and well-being. At the same time the other essential element, keeping a balance in the cosmos by killing and creating new life is more complicated to identify nowadays. One has to kill life to create space for new life. One has to give something very valuable in order to receive something very valuable in return. Contemporary societies however tend to exclude death from our daily lives. People live longer than ever before and as a consequence are no longer willing to include

13 Ter Keurs, *Au nord de Sumatra*, 17.

the possibility of death in their worldview. Advertising is focusing on the extension of life as long as possible. Preferably we thrive for eternal life, although we know this is impossible. In advertising mothers often look like their daughter, as if they have not aged. They may have matured, but they do not look older.

This lack of balance, between male and female, culture and nature, life and death, is broadly felt in contemporary society.<sup>14</sup> And in some periods, such as during the corona crisis of 2020, it is felt even stronger. Here, the study of human sacrifice practices can help us even nowadays. Morally we disapprove of killing life for the benefit of younger, new life, and rightly so. There is no moral justification for killing people and we know from European history how things can go wrong if we do not live according to moral standards that prevent killing on a small or large scale. The concentration camps during the Second World War are extreme and powerful examples of a disregard for killing. However, there is a contradiction here. The moral and legal prohibition to kill may lead to a disregard for death, to a denial of death, to marginalising death. This means that the necessary balance to keep humanity 'on track' is lost or, at least partly, replaced by symbolic killings, by headhunting as a trope. As I said, we usually do not kill people to create space for others, but in present-day society many phenomena serve to replace the actual killing. This is where the study of human sacrifices and headhunting can help us nowadays, to understand what we need and what we should do to keep a balance in human life and in society: in order to ensure a healthy, fertile, sustainable and safe future.

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14 Here, one can refer to public figures and writers such as Al Gore, Naomi Klein, Greta Thunberg and many others.

The background of the entire page is a detailed photograph of an ancient Egyptian wall relief. It features a large, stylized figure on the left, possibly a deity or a pharaoh, with arms raised. The wall is covered in intricate hieroglyphs and smaller figures, including one that appears to be a bird or a winged figure. The relief is carved into a light-colored stone or plaster.

## THE VALUE OF A HUMAN LIFE

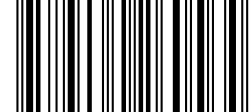
Throughout the millennia and all over the world people have been killed by others, not only in wars and as a result of murders, but also in a ritualised way, often called human sacrifice. Much has been written about this, and research and discussion about ritual killing continue. This book offers contributions to this ongoing discussion, by a re-evaluation of the term human sacrifice, arguing that not all forms of ritual killing can be considered to be sacrificial.

Experts from different disciplines present new insights into the subject of ritual homicide in various regions of the ancient world. Various aspects of the phenomenon are discussed, such as offering humans to gods, making servants accompany their masters into the hereafter, and ritual killing in connection with execution of criminals and captives.

While in some cultures ritual killing was accepted, others would consider it a symptom of barbarism and would use it as a reason or pretext for hostility, war, or genocide. Thus the Romans justified the violence against Carthage partly because of this, early Christians were accused of infanticide, while in turn they accused Jews of the same. The Spanish conquistadores used the argument to justify the genocide on indigenous Americans. The last chapter concerns one of the last surviving forms of ritual killing in recent history: headhunting among the Asmat.

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ISBN: 978-94-6426-056-4



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