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Corbey, Raymond; Weener, Karel

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Collecting while converting: missionaries and ethnographics

Raymond Corbey and Frans Karel Weener

'Thus saith the Lord: repent, and turn
yourselves from your idols; and turn away
your faces from all your abominations.'

Ezekiel 14.6

During the heyday of European empire, nation and Church building, hundreds of thousands of ritual objects from small-scale indigenous societies reached Europe. Here they circulated among gallerists, collectors and artists, through antique shops, flea markets and auctions, and reached various types of museums. They were procured by, among others, colonial administrators, planters, merchants, military personnel and scientists, but also, importantly, Christian missionaries. While there is an abundant literature on shared (between makers and takers) 'colonial', non-European European cultural heritage in general,¹ the pivotal role of missionaries in the latter's convoluted trajectories and the interpretations it received has hardly been studied systematically yet. Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, many museums of ethnology and natural history, as well as art dealers and private collectors, have been keen on acquiring ethnographic objects from missionaries. In quite a few cases museum curators provided the latter with wish lists. There have also been numerous donations by missionaries to museums. Later, the same museums often de-accessioned objects again, mostly by exchange with dealers or other museums, or their collections were dispersed when museums shut down.

The sheer size of, for example, the Roman Catholic missionary effort is illustrated by the World Missionary Exhibition in the Vatican Lateran Palace in 1925. The exhibition, which was intended to promote the missionary enterprise, presented tens of thousands of non-western objects from about 200 dioceses (Fig. 1). The people there, one of its catalogues stated, 'live in complete anarchy ... the strongest play their own judge and go unpunished ... [their] character is necessarily a mixture of mischievousness, revengefulness and cruelty'.² Such negative perceptions of indigenous peoples, including their ritual art, were characteristic of the momentous missionary discourse of that era, and associated with negative aesthetic appreciations of 'superstitious idols'.

¹ Raymond Corbey, *Tribal Art Traffic: A Chronicle of Taste, Trade and Desire in Colonial and Post-Colonial Times*, Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 2000.

² *Weltschau des Katholizismus: Die vatikanische Missionsausstellung in Wort und Bild*, Rome: Apostolic Place of the Vatican, 1925, 106.



Figure 1 The Congrégation des Sacrés Coeurs ('Picpus') exhibiting Oceanic ritual art at the World Missionary Exhibition in the Vatican in 1925. Courtesy of the Damiaancentrum, Leuven, Belgium.

Another case in point is the way in which the Verbite Fathers (Societas Verbi Divini) depicted the Papuan peoples of the German colony in Melanesia, Kaiser Wilhemsland, in their missionary periodical, the *Steyler Missionsbote* between about 1890 and 1910. They systematically represented them as childish, incapable of rational thought, emotionally impulsive, beastly in appearance, morally perverse, cruel, bloodthirsty and superstitious. The missionaries saw these societies as still fully under the sway of the Devil, the grim, omnipresent enemy they had to fight heroically.³ Such views provided a large part of the backdrop against which more positive appreciations, as studied in this volume, could arise in the Christian West of the period.

A frequent stereotypical perception (often invoked or implicitly presupposed in contexts of repatriation of cultural property), is that missionaries took, forbade and destroyed indigenous objects by coercion and force. In line with the missionary propaganda of the period, missionary work has often been seen as systematically and destructively hacking into local culture and religion. And indeed, as we will see, there have been many cases of missionary iconoclasm which seem to support that perception.

But, as we will argue, there have been many, if not more, cases showing that what really happened at the grassroots was much more complex. In fact, the image emerging from quite a few primary sources regarding missionaries in the field is

³ Raymond Corbey & Fred Melssen, 'Paters over Papoea's: Narratio, macht en ideologie in Kaiser Wilhemsland, 1896-1914', *Antropologische Verkenningen* 9, 1, 1990, 11-27. Cf. Jean Piroette, *Périodiques missionnaires belges d'expression française, reflets de cinquante années d'évolution d'une mentalité, 1889-1940*, Louvain, Université Catholique, 1973.

totally different: sometimes so different that it raises questions as to the reliability of reports on seemingly unequivocal cases of taking or destroying by force. A critical, in-depth evaluation is needed of the precise role collecting and converting missionaries and various other parties played in colonial settings, in particular indigenous parties, and how these practices related to how the objects were seen in Europe. This is all the more necessary since source materials are usually scarce and fragmentary, as well as being coloured by the views of the Christian missionaries who wrote them down.

In the following we address the lack of clarity surrounding what happened in such settings where objects started travelling to western destinations or, on the contrary, got destroyed – not an easy task in view of the stereotypical views of their activities which still are around, and the scarcity, ambiguity and tainted character of the available sources. Who did what exactly? What was the relative weight of collecting on the one hand and destroying on the other hand? Why did the two often occur at the same time, as seems to have been the case? And, in particular, how were happenings at the grassroots level represented or, as we will argue, *misrepresented* in missionary periodicals and missionary exhibitions? From this enormous research field, hardly broached, we selected three cases, two Protestant missions in the Netherlands East Indies and a Roman Catholic mission in German Micronesia, of relevance heuristically for the interpretation of numerous other cases.

Collecting or destroying?

Let us first, by way of introduction, have a look at the early days of Dutch Protestant missionary activities in the East Indies in general, which seem to have been characterized not so much by collecting as by destroying images. It is not easy to locate source material related to missionary dealings with ethnographic objects. The somewhat haphazard casuistry presented in this section is most of what was found during a broad-ranging inspection of archives, missionary periodicals, and other sources.⁴

Rigorous image breaking characterized the activities of Joseph Kam and other missionaries of the *Nederlandsch Zendeling-Genootschap* (Dutch Missionary Society) in the Moluccans (Maluku) in the early nineteenth century, as an inspection of the annals of that society learns. Ideally the natives should destroy their sacred things out of their own free will, by burning them or throwing them into the sea, weighed down with stones. On 30 September 30 1816, the native catechist Isak Hustamu wrote to Kam, his superior, who was called ‘the Apostle of the Moluccans’, stating that he had spent four days demolishing among other things thirty-five ‘houses of the Devil’ and fifteen sago woods dedicated to spirits on the island of Haruku.⁵ Similar events took place there in 1822. Temporary barring from

⁴ This section elaborates upon some casuistry from Raymond Corbey, ‘Destroying the graven image: Religious iconoclasm on the Christian frontier’, *Anthropology Today*, 19: 4, 2003, 10-14.

⁵ Isak Hustamu, ‘Brief der gemeente van Huliliuw’, *Berigten en Brieven Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap* 12, 1818, 235-236. Cf. Ido Enklaar, *Joseph Kam, ‘Apostel der Molukken’, ‘s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1963, 79-80, 134.*

the Christian sacraments was used as an effective punishment for not obeying orders to destroy ritual paraphernalia and refrain from traditional ceremonies, songs, tattoos and the like. '[They] know that whenever I discover such things,' Kam writes, about objects related to traditional beliefs and cults, 'the Members of the [Protestant] Community will be excluded from the Holy Supper during an entire year'.⁶

In 1833, Kam's successor August Gericke received word from the Dutch Resident of Saparua on the intensive traditional rituals in the village of Nolot on that island. Gericke hastened to the village, searched all of its houses over the course of three days, and announced that everyone was to be excluded from Protestant services for a whole year. Hereupon the villagers, horrified by this prospect, got rid of their sacred things and offered a list to the missionary of what they had burned or had thrown into the sea – or so the sources would have it.⁷

The same missionary organisation was also active on the island of Celebes (Sulawesi), where F.H. Linemann realized the conversion of considerable numbers of natives in Minahasa in the north. 'Not only in their houses, but also in their hearts all altars of the devil had to be thrown over,' as his Ambonese assistant missionary Hehanusa put it in 1859.⁸ Psychological devastation on the indigenous side is mentioned by Linemann, and in many other cases, as an effect of missionary image-breaking. John Williams of the London Missionary Society, for example, described how after a burning of sacred statues on the Austral Islands in the Pacific in the 1820s 'the grief of the women was excessively frantic, and their lamentations [were] loud and doleful. Many of them inflicted deep gashes on their heads with sharp shells and shark's teeth, and ran about, smeared with the blood which streamed from the wounds, crying in tones of the deepest melancholy.'⁹

A propaganda film made in the 1920s by the German and Protestant Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft on the Christianization of the Mentawai Islands off Sumatra's west coast, is one of the most elaborate sources on image breaking we came across.¹⁰ It shows how villagers pile up ritual objects from their traditional houses which are then burned by, or in the presence of, a missionary in a white suit (Fig. 2). Clearly this scene was partly staged for the occasion, but only to some extent: the objects were real and the ceremony was clearly serious.

⁶ Anonymous, 'Uittreksel uit de brieven', *Berigten en Brieven Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap* 5, 1820, 54.

⁷ Enklaar, *Joseph Kam*, 104.

⁸ F.H. Linemann, 'Berigt omtrent de toetreding van een buitengewoon aantal heidenen in het Likoevangsche', *Mededeelingen Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap* 3, 1859, 299-306, 304.

⁹ John Williams, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands: With Remarks Upon the Natural History of the Islands, Origin, Traditions, and Usages of the Inhabitants*, London: George Baxter Publisher, 1838, 152-153.

¹⁰ Wilhelm Dachwitz, *Mentawai: Auf Vorposten im heidnischen Urwald* (movie, 90 min), Wuppertal: Vereinte Evangelische Missionen, 1928.



Figure 2 Still from a missionary propaganda film (Dachwitz 1927) showing a burning of ritual art on the Mentawai Islands off the coast of Sumatra in the presence of a German, Protestant missionary of the Rheinische Mission..
 Courtesy of the Vereinte Evangelische Missionen, Wuppertal, Germany.

We didn't find cases of similar Roman Catholic goings-on in the Netherlands East Indies, so here are two examples from among many known from other regions. In a letter written in September 1839, the Marist missionary Pierre Bataillon describes his very first actions upon arriving on the Polynesian island of Wallis as follows: 'Next we visited the various villages of the island, helped some seriously sick people, baptized several others, and for the first time burned a large amount of their divinities, which they call *atua muni*.'¹¹ At about the same time, Honoré Laval, of the Missionaires des Sacrés Coeurs de Jésus et de Marie, came down mercilessly on native ritual traditions — which, ironically, he later described in minute ethnographic detail — on Mangareva, one of the Gambier Islands in Eastern Polynesia. He managed to establish a veritable Christian theocracy on that island, building churches on top of the remains of indigenous temples.¹²

Such iconoclastic practices of missionaries did not remain unnoticed among colonial officials and other western parties in the colonies. In Europe they regularly met with disapproval in secular circles, for example in the republican, anti-clerical climate of opinion in nineteenth-century France. Here intellectuals and artists objected firmly, and tended towards less negative appreciations of indigenous traditions and objects.

¹¹ Archives of the Marist Fathers, Rome, cited by Claire Laux, *Les théocraties missionnaires en Polynésie au XIXe siècle*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000, 71.

¹² Honoré Laval, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Mangareva, ère chrétienne, 1834-1871*, ed. by C. W. Newbuby and P. O'Reilly, Paris, Société des Océanistes, 1969.

The Utrechtse Zendingsvereniging in the Geelvink Bay area, c. 1890-1920

Let us now look at some cases for which we have more detailed information. They suggest that what really happened was not just, not even predominantly, due to missionary agency. The first case concerns the (Protestant) Utrecht Missionary Society, active in the Geelvink Bay area (present-day Teluk Cenderawasih), Northwest New Guinea, since 1862. During the first decades the mission was regarded with mistrust and hostility by the indigenous population. By the early 1900s only a few score of Papuans had been baptized and the board of the organisation even had serious doubts whether it was worthwhile continuing the missionary effort in this area.



Figure 3 Korwar ancestor figures from the Geelvink Bay area and other objects, c. 1909, collected in the Geelvink Bay area by missionaries of the Utrechtse Zendingsvereniging. Most of these objects are now in the Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Picture postcard, private collection, the Netherlands.

A series of dramatic events which unfolded from 1907 onwards came as a complete surprise to the missionaries. On New Year's Eve 1907, in a dramatic ritual gesture, the Papuans of the island of Roon suddenly and at first sight inexplicably cast off huge numbers of *korwar* ancestor figures (Fig. 3), without any direct involvement of the mission. 'Amazingly ... the Papuans of their own accord ... are burning their korwars and amulets on the beach, while others are simply throwing them into the sea', missionary Johan van Balen wrote in a letter two weeks after the event. Not urged by anyone to do so, he continues, 'they promised to surrender their korwars and amulets and to burn their ceremonial drums ...'¹³

His fellow missionary Frans van Hasselt too was amazed by what he took to be a sudden interest in Christianity. A few months later van Hasselt mentions 72

¹³ Letter by Van Balen, dated 17 January 1908. J.A. van Balen file, Archive of the Raad voor de Zending (Council for the Protestant Missions), kept in the Utrecht Archief, Utrecht, the Netherlands.

korwars which were handed over to him on the island of Biak: 'After my sermon, almost everyone got up, only to come back a short while later with ... 68 *korwars* that people were prepared to relinquish ... I had in the past tried several times to buy these images for museums, I even offered large sums for them, but always without success ... and now here they lay at my feet and people had brought them willingly to me'.¹⁴

The baffled missionaries were in fact witnessing a so-called millenarian movement, a process of religious renewal which became a decisive factor in subsequent dealings with ritual objects in the Geelvink Bay area by both locals and missionaries, including large-scale burnings of ritual objects by natives.¹⁵ The latter were expecting the return of a legendary hero and the start of a new era; they felt it was therefore time to break with their old customs.

Despite his initial surprise, van Hasselt seems to have had some understanding of the so-called *koreri*-movement. In his diary he writes that when 'Mangoendi who is honoured by the Numfors and Biaks as ... their Lord ... returns, the golden times will begin, the *koreri*; all will be renewed...; our coming [that of the missionaries] was related to the return of this Mangoendi'.¹⁶ Much of this ritual activity focussed on the nearby estuary of the Mambarano river, as did Dutch military explorations in the area. The fact that some Dutch soldiers had inexplicably disappeared there too seems to have provided additional impetus to the imagination of the Papuans.

In ways we don't fully understand yet the *koreri* movement and the related destruction or handing in of objects seem to have been connected to fear of repressive military measures against headhunting and revenge activities. Villagers turned to the missionaries for help. The teachings of the missionaries resembled beliefs associated with the movement, such as the future arrival of a major spiritual figure and a paradise. The missionaries even used such parallels in explaining Christian eschatology.

In 1909 van Hasselt sent hundreds of indigenous objects - *korwars*, amulets, trophy heads and weaponry - to the Netherlands. Much of it was used for a temporary missionary exhibition organized by the Utrecht Missionary Society in 1909, when it was celebrating its 50th anniversary. There, characteristically, about 70 *korwar* figures depicting deceased family members were presented as a result of missionary agency. But in fact, as we have seen, the collecting activities of these Utrechtse Zendingsvereniging missionaries had become possible by native initiatives of a ritual nature. So in this case at least, the stereotypical image broadcast by the missionary propaganda at home – that missionaries arrived and aggressively intervened (converting, collecting, burning) in rather passive, primarily reactive local societies – is off the mark here, and probably elsewhere in the Netherlands East Indies and beyond. Native agency loomed large.

¹⁴ Frans van Hasselt file, Archive of the Raad voor de Zending, 13 May 1908.

¹⁵ Kamma, F.C. 1953, *Kruis en korwar: Een honderdjarig vraagstuk op Nieuw Guinea*, Den Haag, 1953

¹⁶ Diary of 1908, 7 June 1908. Frans van Hasselt file, Archive of the Raad voor de Zending.

Lutheran missionaries on the Batu Islands, c. 1920-1935

Goings-on some twenty years later on the Batu Islands, off the northwest coast of Sumatra, point in the same direction. Until then the Lutheran missionaries had had very few successes during three decades. They were horrified by local beliefs and customs. They forbade statues of ancestors and other spirits, which the villagers often tried to hide from them. In one of his annual reports in 1904, for example, the missionary Wilhelm Frickenschmidt mentions taking in four ancestor figures, 'dirty and horrible idols', wrapped in a cloth: according to him a sign of God's grace and omnipotence.¹⁷ He sold such indigenous ritual objects in Europe.

The missionaries W.F. Schröder and Willem Steinhart, who arrived in 1919 and 1924 respectively, came to witness sudden, large-scale conversions to Christianity in the turbulent years 1926 and 1927. Here too this development came as a complete surprise to the missionaries: 'Suddenly our efforts are rewarded! Wherefrom these sudden changes? We don't know, their causes are hidden from our sight,' Steinhart wrote in a letter in 1927.¹⁸ Not much later however, Steinhart suggests a causal role for a Communist uprising in West Sumatra, including the Batu Islands. When the Dutch colonial authorities repressed this initiative with force, the islanders were scared to death for what the military might do to them. They emphatically started to present themselves as Christians, and therefore not Communists. Suddenly the churches were crowded with believers, the missionaries report. Villagers and village chiefs spontaneously handed in huge numbers of ancestor figures. On 15 December 1927 Steinhart wrote: 'In Spring we had a small mass movement towards Christianity on [the island of] Baluta ... On a Sunday, after my sermon, some fifty adults spontaneously asked to be baptized. At Fono the village chief handed me a boat full of ancestor figures, so from there too much progress can be reported'.¹⁹

A solemn burial of items associated with ancestors and spirits took place on July 17, 1927, on one of the smallest Batu Islands, in the context of a Lutheran baptism of some fifty villagers. It was described in a letter by the missionary's wife. All those who wanted to be baptized, probably because they were afraid of the aforementioned repressive measures, had to hand in their ritual objects, which were piled up next to a hole dug near the church. During a service, these objects were buried while an appropriate song 'made clear that just as these figures were being buried, so now must all that is heathen in our hearts die and also be buried. The

¹⁷ Letter Frickenschmidt to the Nederlandsch Luthersch Genootschap (Dutch Lutheran Mission), written on the island of Pulau Tello on 13 January 1905, Archief van het Nederlandsch Luthersch Genootschap voor In- en Uitwendige Zending en Verwante Instellingen (Lutheran Society for Internal and External Missions), now in the Gemeente Archief Amsterdam (Municipal Archive Amsterdam) .

¹⁸ The letter was published in *Een Vaste Burg is Onze God*, a Dutch Lutheran mission magazine, of 1927, on page 94.

¹⁹ Letter to the Nederlandsch Luthersch Genootschap of 15 December 1927, Gemeente Archief Amsterdam.

spirit of Christ must now lead us'.²⁰ Many objects were buried, but the sources show that a number of others, undoubtedly the artistically more interesting ones, were collected (Fig. 4). The archival sources also show that the 1926 Communist uprising indeed played a considerable role in these events.



Figure 4a, Batu priestess with ritual objects, Sigata Island c. 1935, and Steinhart's colleague. Figure 4b, Lutheran missionary W.F. Schröder with similar objects at a temporary missionary exhibition in Zeist, 1935. Courtesy of the Schröder Family Archive.

The Capuchin mission in Palau, Micronesia, 1907-1918

A third case showing the complexities of iconoclastic agency, and the extent to which such goings-on were misrepresented in Europe, is that of the Roman Catholic Capuchin missionaries in Palau (now known as Belau), one of the Western Caroline Islands in Micronesia. Here too, missionary initiatives only provide part of the story of what happened to indigenous ritual objects.

When German colonial rule in Micronesia started in 1899, German Capuchins took over energetically from their Spanish colleagues, who had not been very effective in converting Palauans. Francis Hazel describes how the German colonial authorities successfully campaigned against ceremonial club houses (*bai*) – social, political and religious units in which associations of men lived – mainly because of forced prostitution and the concomitant spread of venereal disease.²¹ He shows that the village chiefs sided with the authorities because for them the *bai* were a rival power which they had too long been forced to tolerate and could now neutralize. The missionaries welcomed this development because they saw the goings-on in the clubhouses as immoral, but seem not to have had a substantial role in it.

The joint efforts of authorities and village chiefs were also directed against the much respected *korong* spirit priests, another category of rivals for the chiefs.

²⁰ Letter by M. Steinhart-Teudt, in *De Wartburg : Luthersch weekblad* 28, Nr. 48, 26 November 1927.

²¹ Francis X. Hazel, *The Catholic Church in Micronesia: Historical essays on the Catholic Church in the Caroline-Marshall Islands*, Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia: Micronesian Seminar, 2003. Available online: <http://www.micsem.org/pubs/books/catholic/palau/index.htm>. Consulted 15 January 2015, no page numbers.

These native religious specialists were blamed for the fact that many Palauans resented working for German projects and being forced to comply with colonial reforms. The village chiefs thus utilized foreign rule, Hazel writes, 'to break out and put themselves into a position in which they could adopt and adapt cultural practices, and not so incidentally expand the prestige game they had played for years through institutions that were dead or almost so, such as warfare and clubhouse rivalry.'²²



Figure 5 This photograph (made around 1907 by a German Capuchin priest) illustrates one of the last rituals of its kind on Palau, Micronesia. The right wooden spirit figure in the photo was collected by the German Südsee Expedition in 1909 and now is in Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig. Courtesy of the Missionsarchiv of the Capuchin Fathers, Münster, Germany.

It was against the background of these and other aspects of swift modernisation of Palau society in the first two decades of the twentieth century that a number of indigenous ritual objects like those in Figure 5 lost their traditional function and could be collected by various western parties, including missionaries, commercial companies, collectors and scholars. Here too, as in the case of the two aforementioned Protestant missions, but in a different way, local developments not so much caused as witnessed by the missionaries, facilitated their collecting activities.

These goings-on also greatly assisted the collecting of ethnographics on Palau by the 1908-1910 *Südsee-Expedition*, a scientific expedition to German

²² Hazel, *Micronesia*.

administered territories in Melanesia and Micronesia. In total this enterprise yielded some 15,000 objects and 23 scientific volumes.²³

Missionary exhibitions



Figure 6 Stand of the Marist Fathers at a Roman Catholic missionary exhibition in the city of Delft, the Netherlands, 1933. Courtesy of the Marist Fathers Archive, Hulst, the Netherlands.

By the late nineteenth century, profiting from the European imperialist expansion, far greater numbers of missionaries had started to spread all over the non-western world than ever before. Countless Roman Catholic and Protestant organizations and periodicals came into being to support the missionaries overseas. As an example of how ‘heathen’ peoples and their ritual art were represented we will again focus on the Netherlands. Here missionary initiatives gained additional impetus from the influx of Roman Catholic congregations from Germany, due to the *Kulturkampf* – a political attack on the Roman Catholic Church in a predominantly Protestant nation – and from France due to the anti-clerical campaign of the Third French Republic.

Between 1900 and 1939 some 6,000 Roman Catholic missionary personnel (male and female), from the Netherlands – a relatively small country – served in the field, matched by thousands of Protestant ones.²⁴ Thousands of ethnographical objects were sent back to the Netherlands by them. There they were kept in many small missionary museums and shown, sometimes also sold, in particular since the mid-twentieth century, at temporary missionary exhibitions, together with newly

²³ Augustin Krämer, *Palau. Ergebnisse der Südsee-Expedition*, Vol. 3, Hamburg: Friederichsen, 1917.

²⁴ For the following, cf. Th. van den End and H.L.M. Defoer, *De heiden moest eraan geloven: Geschiedenis van zending, missie en ontwikkelingssamenwerking*, exhibition catalogue, Utrecht: Stichting Het Catharijneconvent, 1983.

made articles from overseas. The temporary exhibitions (Roman Catholic *missietentoonstellingen* as well as *zendingstentoonstellingen* staged by the various Protestant denominations) were meant to act as propaganda and raise money and personnel for the missions.

The Roman Catholics (we will elaborate a bit on them here), organized numerous activities related to mission and missionary work during so-called mission weeks, in cities all over the Netherlands. People could see processions, propagandistic movies and mission plays, and missionaries would preach and give talks. These activities were structured around missionary exhibitions which lasted one week, usually from Sunday to Sunday. They brought to public notice the millions of people throughout the world who had never been evangelized.

The first Roman Catholic missionary exhibition in the Netherlands was held in Breda in August 1919. In the next year sizeable missionary exhibitions were organized in various major cities. Between 1920 and 1939 more than one hundred missionary exhibitions took place. All over the country, but in particular in the Roman Catholic south, monasteries, schools, community centres and the like were temporarily transformed into veritable cabinets of curiosities (Fig. 6).

The first exhibitions were rather chaotic. Visitors were overwhelmed with impressions in a labyrinth of stands staffed by priests, with the emphasis on exotica. Surrounded by ritual art and stuffed animals, visitors entering these exhibitions felt temporarily transported to foreign lands and were supposed to be able to absorb something of the atmosphere of life there. Fearsome masks, idols and weaponry were displayed among cases of strange insects and stuffed exotic animals. The priests staffing the stands, preferably active or retired missionaries themselves, charmed their audiences with stories which tended to portray missionaries as heroic pioneers among primitive, heathen, cruel (or helpless) savages, with evil sorcerers or head-hunters as the missionaries' opponents. However, we also came across examples of experienced missionaries criticizing such images projected by people on the home front who organized the exhibitions.

These happenings reinforced the stereotype of missionaries actively intervening in the miserable lives of backward, passive natives, still literally under the sway of the Devil. Through such happenings — which were similar in Protestant circles but less baroque and more austere — countless ethnographic objects found their way to private collectors, benefactors and museums. Among those collectors, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, were many modernist artists like Jan Sluijters, Corneille, Eugène Brands, Jopie Moesman. When in the course of the twentieth century numerous objects collected by missionaries in the colonies ended up in their collections, the appreciation of these objects changed from ugly, uncanny and primitive idols, to pure, spontaneous and deep human expressions of high artistic quality.

Conclusion

While in general the appreciation of indigenous ritual art in missionary settings clearly tended towards the negative until well into the 20th century, the foregoing shows that we should be careful not to generalize too quickly.

Happenings in the field sometimes corresponded with propagandistic stereotypes, but often turn out to be different and more richly chequered than the crude image usually projected on the home front by the boards of missionary organisations and periodicals. Our three case studies — and cases from other regions as well²⁵ — show native agency and autonomous local developments with missionaries as relatively passive, sometimes baffled bystanders, pragmatically taking advantage of the situation wherever possible, for example by obtaining items for sale. For them, native initiatives to get rid of ritual objects came in handy. In spite of missionary propaganda, to some, and often to a considerable extent, conversion was not something done to local people, but something they did to themselves. However, one can ask to what extent they really had become Christian, beyond just adding Jesus, the Holy Virgin etc. as mighty ancestors or spirits to their own spirit world. ‘Our Christians still are heathens’, Steinhart laments in a letter from 17 January 1935, after ten years of proselytizing on a small island.²⁶

In the period of frantic missionary activities under discussion, in the Netherlands East Indies and elsewhere, quite a few missionaries conducted linguistic research. This not only helped to preach and translate the liturgy and the bible into local languages but also, full of animistic cosmology as those languages were, sparked their interest in indigenous traditions. They engaged in ethnography and photography, as in the case of the early twentieth-century Roman Catholic mission on the southwest coast of the Netherlands New Guinea.²⁷ Often these individuals were sharp minded intellectuals, trained in theology on an academic level.

Converging with our argument, conversion to Christianity in Eastern Polynesia in the first half of the 19th century has even been cast as a predominantly indigenous and religious political process. According to Jeffrey Sissons, rendering god-images powerless and destroying associated structures during the early years of missionary activity mainly followed an indigenous tradition of iconoclastic rituals.²⁸ Such rituals aimed at the acquisition of greater *mana* and the consequent revitalisation of society.

In Sissons' view, which underplays the role of missionaries, the destruction of images and the superimposing of churches on indigenous *marae* (sacred spaces)

²⁵ Cf. Raymond Corbey, ‘Destroying the graven image: Religious iconoclasm on the Christian frontier’, *Anthropology Today*, 19: 4, 2003, 10-14.

²⁶ Letter to the Nederlandsch Luthersch Genootschap of 17 January 1935, Gemeente Archief Amsterdam.

²⁷ See Corbey, Raymond, *Headhunters from the swamps: The Marind Anim of New Guinea as seen by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, 1905-1925*, Leiden: KITLV Press and Brill, 2010.

²⁸ Sissons, Jeffrey, *The Polynesian Iconoclasm: Religious Revolution and the Seasonality of Power*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2014.

was simply a different kind of renewal, in which the stratagems of indigenous chiefs and former priests played a crucial role. These processes created excellent possibilities for missionaries, for example those of the London Missionary Society, to forbid, destroy and/or collect.²⁹

Cases such as the Batu Islands, the Geelvink Bay, Palau and, indeed, Eastern Polynesia, urge us to focus on native agency and traditions when we come across brief and coloured source materials. This is also of relevance for ongoing discussions on ethical standards, museum policy and decisions regarding both repatriation and acquisition of cultural property, and for issues regarding representation and exhibition in ethnographic museums. Assessing the complex circumstances under which indigenous ritual art was collected is just one small aspect of coming to terms with some of the ambivalences of the European political and ideological expansion.

As a final caveat to demonstrate that what really happened was complicated and that generalisations are tricky, we would like to end with a remark by Father Joseph Viegen MSC, a Dutch Roman Catholic missionary with a keen ethnographic interest. He visited the Asmat area on the south coast of New Guinea in 1912, accompanying a military exploratory expedition into these then still hardly-known tropical lowlands. Father Viegen wanted to evaluate the possibilities for establishing a mission and studying the language, and collected Asmat shields and ancestor figures in the process. In a deserted village he came across 'a great sculpture ... a nice piece of work, entirely covered with symbolic marks'. The missionary would have loved to take it, he writes, 'but even if the village had been abandoned, it could still be "sacred" to the people. We would similarly not like to see a Zulu coming to desecrate our statues.'³⁰

Raymond Corbey is an anthropologist and philosopher attached to the School of Humanities, Tilburg University and the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, both in the Netherlands. He publishes regularly on western, in particular missionary dealings with ethnographics.

r.corbey@arch.leidenuniv.nl

Frans Karel Weener is an archaeologist/anthropologist and independent researcher on the history of ethnographic collections and ethnographic photography, based in Amsterdam. He is also a research associate at National Museum of Ethnology Leiden and visiting fellow of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies in Leiden.

karel.weener@ethnohistory.nl

²⁹ Cf. Steven Hooper, 'La collecte comme iconoclasme: La London Missionary Society en Polynésie', *Gradhiva* 7, 2008, 120-133, and Karen Jacobs, 'Inscribing missionary impact in Central Polynesia: Mapping the George Bennet collection (1821-1824)', *Journal of the History of Collections* 26, 2014, 263-276. Both stress missionary agency more than Sissons; as does Laux, *op.cit.*

³⁰ Cited by K. Weener, 'Re-collecting Father Viegen's Asmat objects', *Tribal Arts* 73, August 2014, 112-129, 117.