HEADHUNTERS FROM THE SWAMPS
Front cover: Three Marind Anim men posing with bow and arrow. See also the caption on p. 36.

Back cover: Father Petrus Vertenten MSC with a Marind Anim man.
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HEADHUNTERS FROM THE SWAMPS
The Marind Anim of New Guinea as seen by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, 1905-1925

KITLV Press
and
C. Zwartenkot Art Books
Leiden
2010
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On February 2, 1902 the Dutch established an administrative outpost at Merauke along the southwest coast of Dutch New Guinea, not far from the border with British New Guinea to the east. They were responding to complaints from the British government about the intensive headhunting activities in neighbouring British territory by the Marind Anim living along the swampy coast. The Dutch Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (Missionarii Sacratissimi Cordis, MSC) established a missionary post. They were to witness and precipitate the swift, dramatic demise of a rich cultural tradition, of which they recorded the intricate cosmology, complex initiation ceremonies, spectacular art and intensive headhunting in detail. The present publication covers the period until approximately 1925, when Petrus Vertenten MSC, one of the era’s main figures, departed, leaving behind a Marind society that had been irrevocably altered by the Dutch colonial rule.

I obtained permission to publish a number of remarkable photographs from the archive of the MSC congregation, which contains a wealth of ethnographic and mission-historical material dealing mainly with the Moluccas and the southwest coast of New Guinea. In 2006, a major part of the archive was moved to the Erfgoedhuis voor het Nederlands Kloosterleven in St. Agatha, the Netherlands, and hundreds of ethnographically significant photographs were donated to the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde and the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, both in Leiden, the Netherlands. The larger part of the images presented here date from between 1905 and 1925, a few are more recent. Generally speaking we do not precisely know which missionary took which photographs.

Through my research into changing western views of small-scale societies and the formation of ethnographic collections I had been in regular touch with the Tilburg fathers for about ten years when starting this project. In Tribal art traffic; A chronicle of taste, trade and desire in colonial and post-colonial times (Amsterdam, 2000), the thousands of ritual woodcarvings that made their way from the southwest coast of New Guinea to the western world via this congregation play a significant role.1 Whereas the Roman Catholic fathers collected along the southwest coast, the Protestant missionaries who had been assigned the north coast tended not only to collect but also to set fire to indigenous ritual objects.2

From the hundreds of photos taken by the missionaries some fifty were selected for the present publication. This selection was complemented by fifteen pictures taken by Swiss ethnologist Paul Wirz, now kept at the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, Switzerland. Wirz carried out ethnographic fieldwork among the Marind Anim between 1916 and 1919 and revisited the area in 1922. He wrote a hefty four-volume dissertation during the 1920s and subsequently a book for the general public.3 Another four photographs are from the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam.

My choice was guided by their ethnographical relevance to the traditional way of life and worldview of the Marind Anim. That is why, wherever possible, I have selected photographs pre-dating 1920. Already

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Preface
by then, many traditional elements had been eradicated or altered by ravaging epidemics and drastic western interference. However, the missionary photographers themselves had already performed the first culling. It turns out that they, just like the Marind Anim themselves, attached great importance to the spirit world, headhunting, initiations, and other rituals, in particular those surrounding birth and death.

In researching and contextualizing these photographs, I was able to draw freely on unpublished ledgers of missionary posts along the southwest coast of New Guinea and a number of unpublished letters written there, now kept at the MSC archive. I also consulted the Paul Wirz Archive at the Museum der Kulturen, Basel. Furthermore, I greatly profited from numerous short articles written by the missionaries and published in the *Annalen van O.L. Vrouwe van het H. Hart* (Annals of Our Dear Lady of the Sacred Heart) and other periodicals. These articles contain an almost countless number of ethnographically significant observations. This material was supplemented with information drawn from governmental *Memories van Overgave* (official handover reports) and other texts by Dutch government officials. Two dictionaries deserve a special mention: the *Marindeneesch woordenboek I: Nederlandsch-Marindeneesch* (Vertenten and van de Kolk 1922) and the *Marindeneesch-Nederlandsch woordenboek* (Geurtjens 1933c), the compiling of which commenced as soon as the fathers arrived. Both dictionaries reveal a wealth of details on the animistic worldview of the Marind, but also, simultaneously, on the Christian, neo-scholastic worldview of their compilers.

Equally important sources of information are the aforementioned books by Paul Wirz, and Jan van Baal’s authoritative *Dema; Description and analysis of Marind-Anim culture* (Leiden, 1966). This solid ethnography, with no less than a thousand pages, is the fruit of a close collaboration with Father Jan Verschueren MSC, as is apparent from the title page and the extensive surviving correspondence between the two. Van Baal (1909-1992) took a degree in ethnology in the Netherlands, to then serve as a government official in Merauke between 1935 and 1940. He governed Dutch New Guinea between 1952 and 1958, and was subsequently appointed professor of cultural anthropology at Utrecht. For nearly four decades he shared his passion for the Marind with *Gods woudloper* (“God’s woodsman”) Father Jan Verschueren MSC, until the latter’s death in 1970. As an ethnographer, the intriguing, indefatigable Verschueren was on a par with great pioneers such as Petrus Vertenten MSC and Jos van de Kolk MSC.

The photographs presented here have slowly become more familiar to me, yet by the same token remained strange, in fact if anything they became stranger still. I was frustrated by the fact that it proved very difficult to bridge the gulf between the views and feelings of the Marind Anim and myself. I was moved by the tragic demise of this people and their rich spirituality, including the ravages brought about by contagious diseases. I felt uneasy about the voyeuristic, aggressive quality of certain photographs, an effect compounded by the colonial setting. The same goes for my tendency to frown upon the fathers for condemning the Marind Anim, while condemning certain aspects of the Marind tradition myself. But above all, I was, and remain, captivated and astounded by these evocative, elusive photographs.
Introduction
A map of part of the territory inhabited by the Marind Anim along the southwest coast of New Guinea, showing a number of the Marind villages mentioned in the text as well as the Dutch governmental and missionary post of Merauke. The situation is depicted as it was around 1920.
At the time of the establishment of a governmental outpost on the bank of the river Maro in 1902, about 8,000 Marind Anim (literally 'Maro-people') were living along the swampy southwest coast of New Guinea, distributed over some eighty settlements. Another 6,000 or so inhabited the interior. The first mission post was established at Merauke (1905). Missions at Wendu (1908) and Okaba (1910) followed. This book covers a period during which just a few dozen predominantly male Dutch were present in the Marind area.

Each mission was manned by one or two missionaries, who were among the first white people to be encountered by the thousands of Marind around them. During this initial period no more than ten missionaries were active at any given moment among some 8,000 Marind, dispersed along more than 200 kilometers of coastline. “[We live in] a small bamboo hut, covered with grass […] conditions are trying [with all the] rain, wind, dust, [and] vermin,” Jos van de Kolk MSC writes from the Marind village of Okaba on September 6, 1910 in a letter to the Missiehuis MSC in Tilburg, the Netherlands.4

The writings of the missionaries portray the Marind as very proud, somewhat crude, but intelligent, warm and generous individuals. Father Henricus Nollen MSC, who worked among them between 1905 and 1910, reported: “The people are truly cordial and talkative, inquisitive too.” Petrus Vertenten MSC, active between 1910 and 1925, stated: “[They are] veritable human beings, smart beings, with a delightful language, unwritten literature, and an appreciation for what is good and beautiful.” Jos van de Kolk MSC (1910-1915) remarked: “[These] crude savages are veritably sociable chaps […]. The true Marind is sociable, cheerful, fun-loving, and goes through life laughing … [They love] playing pranks, ridiculing, splitting their sides at a mishap that turns out well, guffawing when someone looks comical … [they] give […] fitting nicknames.” Eduard Cappers MSC (1906-1909) observed: “It is remarkable how [they] have an open eye for all aspects of nature. They take immense delight in, and voice their admiration of, a lustrous garden of coconut palms, a flock of birds, the setting sun.”5

“I am], probably, the last living witness of weiko-zi, in which the men […] illuminated by numerous torches, circled solemnly in step with their impressive singing and drumming […] the scene […], in all its ceremonially and restraint, was one of overwhelming beauty […] a reflection of all that was splendid in this passionate and violent culture.

(Jan van Baal 1939:311-2)
In the foreground we see villagers fishing on a sandbank just off the shore. In the background: a typical coastal landscape consisting of a beach, backed by sand dunes, mangroves and cultivated gardens. Behind that, not visible in this photograph, lies the flat, marshy interior.

Clans and spirits

In the following, the traditional Marind culture as encountered by the Dutch at the start of the 20th century is sketched. Dramatic changes have since taken place. However, some traditional elements have persisted to the present day, often in an altered form. Marind is still spoken besides bahasa Indonesia, family names and ties have endured, and certain rituals continue to be practiced or have recently been revived, often in secret.

As van Baal details in his monumental ethnography, the Marind recognized four clans or descent groups (boan). They carried the names of important spirits (dema), from whom descent was claimed: Geb, Aramemb, Mahu and Bragai. The four clans each harboured – to put it in somewhat simplified terms – one or more families or subclans (also called boan), of which there were about ten in all. One was expected to marry outside one’s subclan. The Geb and the Aramemb together formed a higher unit, a moiety, as did the Mahu and the Bragai. The former moiety held initiations of the mayo type, the latter of the imo type (see the diagram on p. 14). No matter how widely the Marind travelled throughout their territory, they would always encounter kin folk carrying the same family name and willing to offer hospitality.

The four main clans were Geb, Aramemb, Mahu and Bragai. Only a Geb was permitted to shout “Geb!” while sneezing and appear in rituals as the dema (spirit) called Geb, who was associated with the sun and the coconut. The principal dema of the Aramemb subclans were the cassowary (a flightless bird), the stork and the wallaby, respectively; the Mahu had a special relationship with the dema of the sago palm. Subclans of the Bragai associated themselves primarily with the crocodile, betel nut, sea, and pig.

In rituals it was prohibited to play the role of spirits or totems other than one’s own. Given that spirits of various families appeared in every ritual, the
Mahu and the Geb, for instance, required each other’s presence at their feasts. Exchange of ritual services fostered continuous close relationships, as did the exchange of marriage partners between clans or sub-clans. The Marind were also connected by a shared language or dialect, by inhabiting the same village or hamlet, or by belonging to the same age grade. The male population controlled ritual life and tended to play first fiddle in other fields as well.

“Geb” is a totemic name: specific (sub)clans associate themselves with spirits and animals, plants or other things. In this manner, they express their shared identity as opposed to other groups. One has to marry someone from another subclan. The Geb clan associated themselves with the sun, or rather the sun dema, and with coconuts to be picked as heads are taken. There were many versions of an origin myth with Geb as the protagonist, the majority sharing the following elements:

Geb, ugly and pimpled, abuses village boys on the beach. He takes their heads. The village men chase him. They throw him in a water-filled pit on the beach. He is as hot as the sun and sizzles. They decapitate him! Coconut palms pop up where the flying blood splatters hit the ground. How-
The basic structure of Marind Anim society as the missionaries encountered it a century ago: four clans (bold), two moieties and their connotations (in white), about ten subclans or families, named after animals or spirits. Based on van Baal 1966.
ever, Geb’s head suddenly has legs and takes off along the shore. In the morning he rises as the sun in the sky. He sets daily in the west and hurries underground to Kondo in the east, to rise again there. The villagers chop Geb’s body into pieces, from which the various clans originate.\(^6\)

In myth and ritual, the Geb and Aramemb associated themselves with life, coast, daytime, and animals. In contrast, the Mahu and the Bragai (together forming the other moiety in society) felt connected to death, the interior, night, and dangerous animals.

In daily life, the Marind Anim traditionally interacted equally intensively with their spirits as they did with each other. They communicated with the dema, manipulated them, identified with them, and found themselves fearing them one minute and valuing and caring for them the next. The personalities and peccadilloes of scores of dema are detailed in a huge, variegated corpus of wonderful myths. These provided scenarios for the rituals in which spirits appeared in a spectacular way as well as lyrics for the headhunting song (ajassee) and the mourning song (warut). One of the many mayo myths for instance goes approximately as follows:

The dema woman Ualiwamb flees westwards, away from her husband, as the sun crosses the sky. However, her husband catches up with her. They mate. They cannot free themselves from each other. The dark of night covers them like a mat, under which they head to the East. Once there the spirit Aramemb disentangles them. Ualiwamb gives birth to fire and the stork. That is why the fire [the sun] passes through the sky daily. That is why the novice, dressed up as a stork [during initiation], grows into an adult.\(^7\)

Such a worldview was, and still is, referred to as “animistic”. This is of course an ethnocentric term, that projects the European religious and philosophical concept of anima, soul, on other cultural traditions. However, for lack of a better concept it is per-
haps appropriate. Many things are regarded as imbued with spirits: storks, wallabies, sago palm trees, stones, clouds, the sea, celestial bodies, bows, fire, but also contagious diseases, beached whales, the first Europeans, aeroplanes and gramophones, guns and compasses.

Dozens of spirits featured prominently at the mayo and into initiation feasts. More is known about the exuberant, jolly mayo of the coast than about the highly secretive, sombre, menacing and haughty into that took place mainly in the interior. The mayo ritual proceeded from east to west along the coast, to be performed once every four years in each region, by which time a fresh group of youngsters awaited initiation. Wearing no more than coconut-fibre cloaks, they had to play dead in order to be slowly revived by numerous spirits appearing at the scene to gradually acquaint them with everything a Marind ought to know.

Boys, and to a lesser degree girls, learned the many applications of coconuts, how to trap animals, make

The mission post of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart at Merauke, probably in the 1920s. The first missionaries arrived here in 1905, after which other missions were established, including Wendu (1908) and Okaba (1910). The few missionaries who lived among thousands of Marind were offered the unique opportunity to record some of the wealth of a cultural tradition soon to be swept away by a whirlwind of change.
This passionate and violent culture

fire, prepare sago, take a head, and which plants were associated with which spirits. On a more abstract level, they learned why everything is as it is in terms of primordial happenings and beings. This initiation into the mythical, social, technological and ecological knowledge of their people came with widespread promiscuity, even within families. The handwritten Okaba mission ledger notes that in April 1911, a bride had intercourse with about a hundred male villagers in the course of one night.

Intensive consumption of human semen was of the utmost importance in almost all rituals. Such behaviour, indeed repulsive to western sensibilities, had to do with the main theme in all rituals: fertility, power, life, blessing, wih. “Given that the cosmo-religious vision of the Marind [...] posits the unity of all living beings,” according to Father Verschueren, “[...] of life that in its own passing continually generates new life, then the means to realize such sustained life is that great life-giver, life-bringing semen.”8 In his eyes, otiv bombari, intercourse between a woman and many men, was the epitome of a religious deed. In this context one encounters time and again the symbolism of coconut palm and coconut, which were of such great importance to the Marind, associated with bodies and severed heads and with Geb, the headhunting sun dema whose own head was once taken.

“A living world full of surprises and unexplored possibilities shrouded in secrecy,” is how colonial official and anthropologist van Baal characterized the traditional world of the Marind, “[...] a world which is always more than meets the eye, which [he] addresses with magical speech and experiences through dance and rituals as [...] both wholly familiar and [...] terrifying, now alluring, then scaring off. [...] [The] demons who populate the world and whom he fears are at the same time his ancestors, the creators of the sun and moon, plants and animals.”9

By and large, Marind Anim rituals and other customs exhibited numerous similarities with those of the hundreds of other peoples of New Guinea. This is particularly true for the societies along the south coast, such as the Auwyu, Yagai, Asmat and Kamoro to the northwest of the Marind and the Kiwai, Purari and Elema to the east.10

Snatching heads and names

Until the Dutch clamped down on the practice, the Marind Anim had hunted heads intensively. Headhunting to them was “all things at once: war, raid, and rite,” according to van Baal.11 This practice was part of a widespread, Southeast Asian and Melanesian headhunting complex. Colonial authorities and missionaries alike have generally regarded headhunting as primitive bloodthirstiness, anthropologists on the other hand have come to see it as a ritual activity often imbued with a profound cosmological meaning. Fertility, fortune and prestige were at stake. Further motives underlying the practice of headhunting in this part of the world were restoration of cosmic balance, vengeance, recruitment of the soul of the victim, expansion of territory and the acquisition of names for children.12

Acquiring a name was paramount to the Marind. Besides the prestigious severed head, the main prize was the pa igiz, literally “head-name”. A headhunter would attempt to tease this out of his dying victim in order to ceremonially bestow it upon his son or daughter upon his return, who could not become a full-fledged adult without a head-cum-name, acquired in the correct manner. The headhunting journey itself also had an overt ritual character. Father Jos Viegen mentions ritual tokens that were made of straw and placed amidst freshly decapitated bodies. The headhunting expedition was in fact part of an initiation ritual that lasted weeks and involved intensive communication with numerous spirits.

It is estimated that for every generation of around 14,000 Marind, traditionally about the same number of heads were taken. Indeed, every individual growing up had to receive a headhunting name. During the early years of Dutch rule, heads were being tak-
Daily life in a traditional Marind Anim village along the coast, probably around 1915. The men occupied longhouses, separate from the women who lived in the surrounding huts with their children.
en on such an enormous scale that adjacent areas in their entirety were in danger of becoming depopulated. Rather than other Marind, neighbouring peoples with another language were targeted, sometimes even up to a distance of several hundred kilometres away. Amongst each other, the Marind maintained all sorts of peaceful exchange relationships. Exchange pacifies.13

On the subject of taking heads, Father Vertenten writes that it is

[…] a terrible, repulsive, barbaric custom. And yet the word kui, headhunting journey, resounds with poetry to these savages. To catch victims, find out their names, sever the heads, and take off with them, that is the prime goal; but the journey itself is also of great interest to them. Extremely appealing, […] Once underway, the knowledgeable mutter secret, magic formulae, they blow into their fist and open it in a sweeping gesture over the unfortunate village. These are sleeping formulae, designed to cast a deep sleep over the people! […] In the utmost silence, the village is approached and surrounded. […] All paths and escape routes are blocked. […] The attackers beat their chests and cry their fathers’ name: ‘The son of Widu has come to take your heads!’14

A massacre inevitably ensued, as we know from the writings of the missionary Viegen, who was as acute as Vertenten in terms of ethnographic observation. The former did not hesitate to pursue the headhunters in order to find out exactly what had taken place. “Like cornered game,” Vertenten resumes, “most, if not all, fall to the besiegers. Bows snap, sharp arrows fly in every direction, club blows land. Cries of the hunters are heard above everything else. The battle is swiftly concluded […] All above the age of about thirteen are mercilessly decapitated.” In contrast, children below that age were carried off, adopted, and raised with great affection.

Around 1925, there were individuals with a headhunting name besides their traditional clan name and, additionally, a Roman Catholic baptismal name. The latter was, like the headhunting name, given during a rite of passage governed by myth and featuring spirits. Often a fourth name, a nickname, would refer to some physical peculiarity, such as a scar or obesity. Following this example we could come across Matheus Ondoor Geb Fatso: Matheus (baptismal name) Ondoor (headhunting name) Geb (clan name) Fatso (nickname). The ensuing generations lost access to heads and headhunting names as a result of Dutch intervention.

Linguistic research by the missionaries regularly turned up peculiar names among the Marind Anim. In one case a name meant “mother help me” in the language of a neighbouring group to the northwest. These were a victim’s last words before his head was severed, perceived to be the dying person’s name by the headhunter and given to his own child. Another Marind was called “I die”, again in another language. The Marind used to refer to other peoples living along the rivers Digul and Mappi disparagingly as “meat”.

Between 1905 and 1913, the missionaries complained time and again in mission ledgers and in letters to the Netherlands about intensive headhunting activities, in great detail. In October 1910, thousands of Marind set off on a headhunting expedition, departing from about a hundred kilometers of coast, an area in which only three missions were stationed, each occupied by no more than one or two missionaries, with no power to intervene. In April 1911, a headhunting party left Okaba and neighbouring villages for the interior. In September of the same year, further headhunting activities and ensuing “head ceremonies” at a number of villages were reported.15

In April 1912, the Marind of Wambi set off, the missionaries wrote in their ledger, followed by those of Mewi later that year. Men from Alatep returned with twenty heads. A headhunting feast took place at Alaku, implying that heads were taken there as well. The Marind knew full well that these activities were not approved of and operated as furtively as possible. At Sangassee, formerly the most notorious village in the region and severely punished in 1912, five
Heads and two kidnapped children turned up. The numbers provided by the missionaries are in accordance with Dutch government documents.

The authorities took severe measures against the inhabitants of the villages of Merauke and Okaba and their immediate surroundings in the course of 1913 (see p. 83). In all, several hundred heads, some very fresh, were seized in some twelve villages and either burnt or buried. In a certain village, a “gnawed arm with a smoked hand” was found, the remnant of an *imo* ritual. Newly abducted children were taken from the villages and entrusted to the care of the mission. A number of Marind who resisted fiercely were shot dead. Dozens more were imprisoned to later serve sentences at Merauke or on the Moluccas. Canoes and men’s houses were set on fire, villages peppered by ships’ cannons. The village of Wambi, where headhunters remained active in spite of repeated sanctions, was punished again in the autumn of 1914, resulting in thirty-two deadly fatalities. Deep in the interior, however, headhunting persisted for decades.16

Observation and suppression

After their departure the individual missionaries tended to be remembered as quasi-mythical hero figures by the local population. Vertenten, Viegen, van der Kooy, van de Kolk and others: they were invariably in their twenties and thirties, hailing from the Roman Catholic countryside of the southern Netherlands. As a result of their seminary education they were better versed in theology and liturgy than in ethnography or medicine. While going to great lengths to deliver God’s word to the Marind, the Fathers supported them in various ways. The spirituality of their congregation emphasized the compassionate Christ with the priest carrying out God’s will by following the example of Christ, who lived in him and worked through him.

From the very start, the missionaries were fascinated by the Marind Anim worldview, traditions and language. We owe much of our current knowledge regarding the peoples along the southwest coast of Dutch New Guinea to their ethnographic and linguistic research. Father Jos Viegen, for instance, who was active in the region between 1909 and 1915, proved himself to be a keen observer and wily questioner, and even managed to participate in secret rituals.

“The language of a savage,” wrote van de Kolk, “is his most human possession: his speech betrays to us his inner take on life, development, intelligence, feelings, all full of surprises. Listening to such an unrecorded language bit by bit, setting it down, taking it apart, and reconstructing it again is a lengthy and arduous task, but a curiously rewarding pleasure.”17 Notes in school jotters developed into Dutch-Marind (Vertenten and van de Kolk 1922) and Marind-Dutch (Geurtjens 1933c) dictionaries. Many entries are rich in ethnographic detail. All that is distasteful in the eyes of the Fathers, however, was censored in translation and Roman Catholic terminology surfaces time and again in their rendering of Marind spirituality and cosmology.

The missionaries felt highly ambivalent towards the traditional culture, as the following remark by van de Kolk shows:

Besides the rudest improprieties, one encounters the utmost refinement and at times overly severe moral principles […] It may come as some surprise that the Marind are at heart soft, amiable, friendly, hospitable, jovial […]. One seeks to detect a hint of familiarity in their wild eyes, friendliness in their incomprehensible words, kind-heartedness in their random gestures. All this is offered up to you in abundance right from the very start.

Elsewhere van de Kolk wrote: “What good lies hidden deep down in the soul of this bestial people […]. How fair and grand is the work of the missionary, who mines that buried gold and christens the poor souls.”18

In co-operation with the colonial government, the missionaries attempted to eradicate customs and