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Article

Facehunting

Empathy, Masculinity and Violence Among the Bugkalot

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Abstract This article discusses how anthropological explorations of empathy can be enriched through a focus on transgression. Empathy is commonly understood as a human capacity that allows a person to share the feelings of others through some form of mental engagement. Thereby, it is believed, empathy establishes compassionate relationships between people and prevents violence from breaking out. In this article, I suggest the opposite may be the case: in fact, empathy may be the very foundation for acts of radical violence and killings. The ethnographic basis of my inquiry is research conducted among the Bugkalot (Ilongot) of northern Philippines on the practice of headhunting. I propose that empathy is what allows violence to achieve its transformative capacity. Furthermore, I seek to show how understanding headhunting as ‘murder’ may disclose how this particular act is tied to masculine ideals of autonomy. Headhunting, I argue, targets not the head but the ‘face,’ that is, it strikes at the very fulcrum of the ethical relation and the foundation of empathy.

Keywords Bugkalot, Ilongot, headhunting, empathy, transgression, violence

*This infinity, stronger than murder,
already resists me in her face, is her face,
is the primordial expression, is the first word:
‘you shall not commit murder.’
Levinas, *Totality and Infinity**

‘It is not easy! It is a hard task!’ ... In 2010, I was having a discussion with Tó’paw, a 60-year-old Bugkalot man, about the practice ritual headhunting, *ngayó*, which involved cutting off the head of the victim. He was irritated that this form of killing, which was largely abandoned as a common practice in the Sierra Madre Mountains of northern Philippines in the 1970s, was today talked about among the youth as if it was merely some type a ‘game.’ It seemed vital to him that I understood that *ngayó* had deep and at times devastating effects on the *dima mamotog*— ‘the ones who cut.’ ‘I once had the experience that I could not hold on to my bolo,’ he continued. ‘I had to hold it with both of my hands. This was not just because of fear. To kill a human this way is hard. It’s a big thing for the young man who succeeds in this endeavour. It is supposed to be demanding.’

In this article, I examine a form of masculinity that manifests itself through transgression. In this sense, not only is it ‘demanding’ to kill another person—it is, within the context of headhunting, *supposed* to be demanding. *Ngayó* refers to the type of



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headhunting that made the Bugkalot¹ rise to scholarly fame through the works of Michelle Rosaldo (1980, 1983, 1984) and Renato Rosaldo (1980, 2004). It is a collective event that circles around the intentional beheading of a human person. And the treatment of the victim's body during *ngayó* seems surprisingly brutal: after the victim had been ambushed and shot, his or her head was cut off at the neck, preferably in one determined strike with the headhunting knife, the *tek-yaden*, and was subsequently tossed to the ground with all the force that the killer could muster in a final deed known as *balabag*. This treatment of the head (or rather, the face) was part of a transformative act that ultimately aimed to render the man autonomous as he was no longer dominated by chaotic emotions of shame, and anger.

This situation requires us to reconsider key questions concerning the role of empathy in relation to violence, especially in the way empathy tends to be considered as being antithetical to violence. Empathy, in this conventional view, is based on the pre-reflexive experience of the affective and experiential world of others as analogous to our own. This phenomenological engagement in the world is implicit in our recognition of others as members of our moral community. Empathy, then, involves a moral commitment to others, a certain proximity, which *commands us not to kill*. This idea is present in Zygmund Bauman's book, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, in which he reveals a Levinasian inspiration in his thinking. He argues that our sense of responsibility for other people is dependent upon proximity. Thus, morality 'looms large and thick close to the eye. With the growth of distance, responsibility for the other shrivels, moral dimensions of the object blur, till both reach the vanishing point and disappear from view' (Bauman 1989, 192). Writing about the famous experiment conducted by the psychologist Stanley Milgram at Yale University, Bauman argues that 'it is difficult to harm a person we touch. It is somewhat easier to afflict pain upon a person we only see at a distance' (Bauman 1989, 155). Rather than holding that Bauman is incorrect, I will argue that a form of violence exists that is nourished by exertion. This type of violence is transgressive through and through and would and in fact does only exist due to being difficult to carry out.

This article contributes to current attempts to expand the category of empathy and to explore the ways in which empathy may be culturally patterned (Throop 2010, 771). The task would be, as Nils Bubandt and Rane Willerslev recently phrased it, to move beyond 'the implicit idea that empathy is always a moral virtue and instead embrace a broader approach that also encompass its darker, but no less social side' (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015, 6). They argue that empathetic engagement with others may, in certain situations, not have intersubjective compassion and mutual understanding as its goal, and likewise the end-result may not always be a stronger social cohesion. In fact, the opposite may be the case. Empathy can be used for deceptive and ultimately violent purposes: the capacity for imagining the vantage point and emotional life of another person may also provide a way to manipulate, abuse, and dehumanize that person.

¹ For reasons that go beyond the scope of this article, the Bugkalot gradually changed their name during the 1970s. They began to be known as the E'gongot, meaning 'from the forest/mountain,' by the lowlanders and subsequently became widely known as the Ilongot within the anthropological literature through the ethnographic works of Renato Rosaldo (e.g., 1980, 2004) and Michelle Rosaldo (e.g., 1980, 1983). In accordance with the wishes of my informants, I will refer to them by the term Bugkalot.

Following this attempt to uncover the ‘dark side of empathy’ this article seeks to show that rather than being antithetical to violence, empathy may, in some situations, be intrinsically linked to violence—not merely as that which makes violent acts possible, as Bubandt and Willerslev suggest, but as that which spurs and gives meaning to violence. This is the argument I pursue. However, I will argue that there may be a link between empathy and violence even when an empathetic relationship based on compassion persists between assailant and victim. Thereby empathy becomes the violent agent itself rather than a means to a violent outcome.

The Dark Side of Empathy

Across a wide range of scholarly fields, empathy is seen as centrally important in relation to our capacity to respond to others ethically (Copland and Goldie 2014). While such ideas have a long history, they have found their contemporary champions in influential scholars such as the professor of developmental psychopathology, Simon Baron-Cohen. Believing that empathy is an ability as old as homo sapiens itself, he considers it ‘the “glue” of the social world, drawing us to help others and stopping us from hurting others’ (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright 2004, 163). According to Baron-Cohen (2004) we respond to cruelty in three ways: (1) we may ‘experience’ the suffering, (2) we may respond in ways that are considered culturally appropriate without experiencing the suffering, or (3) we may take pleasure in the suffering. Baron-Cohen argues that the first two should be considered empathetic responses while he explicitly categorizes the third response as unrelated to the empathetic faculties of humans (see also Young 2012, 415). As reflected by the title of his most recent book, *The Science of Evil* (2011), Baron-Cohen’s work demonstrates the shifting of the study of ‘evil’ from the fields of philosophy and theology into the field of neuroscience. Evil becomes a naturalistic quality or a disposition, which involves a lack of empathy, while empathy is regarded as the foundation for human moral behaviour:²

Empathy, understood as a particular process in which one person imagines the particular perspective of another person, is said to presuppose a conception of the other as a distinct individual. In other words, by generating a ‘fundamentally individualizing view of another’ (Halpern and Weinstein 2004, 567) empathy is understood to counteract objectifying and generalizing practices, which might in turn legitimize violence. This fundamental empathic conception of the other as a human like myself, it is often argued, has as its critical consequence that ethnic cleansing and other mass scale violence require processes of dehumanization in order to render such violence feasible; the victims must first be classified as less-than-human (Hinton 2002).

Yet, within the last decade, anthropologists in particular have challenged such longstanding assumptions concerning empathy. They have commented on what they perceive to be a fundamental misapprehension in the way philosophers, social scientists, and, more recently, neuroscientists, have linked empathy to fundamental altruistic, social drives among humans. Nils Bubandt (2009) argues that empathy may just as well involve imagining the other as fundamentally inhuman thus legitimizing violence against

² The conclusion on this issue within the neurosciences, however, is not unanimous. For instance, a recent study shows that empathy for others can motivate violence on their behalf. For instance, the father who beats the man who has assaulted his child (Buffone and Poulin 2014).

political opponents. The aspiration of this form of ‘hostile empathy’ (ibid., 566) is not to obtain an ‘understanding nor compassionate knowledge of the mind of the other. Instead it has the aim of laying ... the imagined hostile intentions of another in a political world where the mind of the other is not open to scrutiny’ (ibid.). As Bubandt explains, hostile empathy permits ‘an imaginary leap into the mind and emotions of the other that serves to reveal his inhumanity’ (ibid., 567). Likewise, in a recent article with Rane Willerslev, Nils Bubandt (2015) provides the argument that the link between empathy and deception has been given scant attention in the burgeoning literature on empathy. What they call for is a move beyond the idea of empathy as an altogether altruistic capacity or as synonymous with ‘sympathy.’ They visit ethnographic cases where people identify with the bodily states and experiences of significant others and yet, ultimately, apply their empathetic understanding to hurt, cheat, and even kill the other. Thus, while compassion, mutual understanding, care, and social cohesion are the goals that have conventionally been regarded as the *sine qua non* of empathy, Willerslev and Bubandt deliver the simple, yet overlooked, argument that the empathetic faculty may also be used for deceptive, dehumanizing, and violent purposes.

While this argument goes a long way towards widening our understanding of empathy it recapitulates the idea that empathy is in fact antithetical to violence—only in this approach empathy is applied to dehumanize the victim before the violence can be legitimized and carried out. They thereby reinforce the assumption found in much writing, both popular and academic, that a process of dehumanization precedes violence. For instance, it has been observed that within military training, enemies are persistently referred to as ‘rats,’ ‘dogs,’ and other terms by which they are portrayed as ‘inferior forms of life’ (Grossman 1995, 161) and set apart from the moral community (Blok 2000, 29). This, one could argue, creates a suspension of ethical responsibility.

This approach, which seeks to grasp and understand violence through the moral framework of dehumanization, still leaves a critical set of questions unresolved—in particular, in relation to the way that violence may gain a particular impact on the violator through the act of *willfully rupturing the empathetic relation*. Such forms of violence do not involve a suspension of empathy, but maintain the empathetic bond *in order to* rupture it. This is the case with *ngayó*.

The Bugkalot: Violence and Male Personhood

The Bugkalot communities are nestled in the Caraballo and Sierra Mountain Range of northern Luzon. Although the approximately 46 villages are set apart by the expanse of these two mountain ranges, linguistic similarities are found throughout the area. Until recently, various areas of the mountains were associated with different clans, and warfare could persist for decades. However, with the escalation of agriculture and establishing of roads, as the two major, interlinked agents of change in the area, the contact between the clans has increased to the extent that the clan-label has today become almost insignificant in daily life. The institutions around which everyday life revolves are the household and conjugal family, and the networks of kinship and affinity that link these units together in exchanges of food, wealth, and labour.

The small village where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork had achieved *barangay* status in 1982. This meant that it had become recognized by the state as an administrative division or a district within the Philippines. With the institution of the *barangay*, the position of *punong barangay*—the official head of the district—was also introduced. This position is up for election every three years. Whereas anthropologists have often noted that the state and its administrative techniques are widely regarded as alien impositions among rural communities around the world, this was not the case within a Bugkalot context in any straightforward way. They openly invited the political forms of the state into village life. But when viewed through local ideas of authority, such forms were little more than performances. The men I came to know who held or had previously held the position of *punong barangay* admitted that this position had entailed only a minimum of real influence. Even after the introduction of the *barangay* structure, the *de facto* largest political unit was the individual household, referred to as *ten tengeng*, one trunk. The *punong barangay* explained that while no hostility was directed against them, any attempt to make any changes in the village was simply ignored.

However, the egalitarianism among the Bugkalot manifests itself not only as disregarding of political authority. Daily interaction was, in fact, saturated by egalitarian decorum. For instance, bragging (*manga'ngada'ngadang*,) was considered an extreme breach of politeness that caused 'bad atmosphere' (*ngégetáget*) and 'bad feelings' (*en-oget ma nem-nem*). Such effects are considered adverse since they brought about feelings of jealousy among peers (*apet*).

While the Bugkalot identify themselves patrilineally by descent through the male line, they have traditionally practiced a matrilineal form of post-marital residence: the man was expected to move in with his in-laws until he had paid the bridewealth (*lango*). This often entailed that the man moved to a community where he had a limited social network. My younger informants wanted to avoid the traditional conjugal procedures that they saw as outmoded and frustrating. For instance, prior to the wedding it was expected that the future husband would work for the girl's family, a practice known as *tognod*, which could sometimes last for several years. This period was described to me as a time of profound loneliness and insecurity. Often, the young man was requested to carry out arduous tasks in the fields, to bring back hunting rifles, generators, and various expensive tools from the lowlands that he had no chance of procuring. When failing to do so he became the target of agonizing insults from his peers.

Due to the emotional torment of the young men, they were often spoken of as vulnerable, unpredictable, and prone to emotional outbursts. This condition was referred to as *ligét*—a term that refers to a form of rage that may erupt in unforeseeable ways. But it was not only young men who could be marked by *ligét*. When faced with bereavement, such as the loss of a close relative, more mature men could also be overcome by *ligét*. As the *ligét* of men could erupt in ways that could attract legal action, it involved an inherent threat to the tranquility in the villages. I was often told that some men would try to overcome *ligét* through assertive action. Such action was referred to as *pámotok*, 'cutting.'

Ngayó

Originating within the context of headhunting, *pámotok* refers to the cut—the severing of the head from the body—while the overall framework of the customary practice—the departure, the long journey through the forest and the kill—is known as the *ngayó*. Yet, in most accounts the former headhunters do not refer to the head as such. Rather than targeting the head, *ngayó* targets the ‘face’ (*ga-nob*). Among the Bugkalot, as elsewhere, the face is related to the social aspects of one’s personhood as the locus of empathy, ethical relations, and the signalling of emotional states. Thus, the cut that was carried out during *ngayó* entailed setting oneself apart from the ordinary forms of social interaction, which were marked by humble restraint (Author 2013). In other words, the purpose of *ngayó* was not first and foremost a matter of prestige or creating a difference in status between *momotok* (‘cutters’) and non-*momotok*. In fact, it was not possible to detect who had been engaged in *ngayó* from the way they were treated in general or from the amount of respect they received. This observation is supported by the Philippinist and historian William Henry Scott (1979). He wrote that headhunting among the Bugkalot did not have any significant influence on the social status of the killer, who was neither awarded with special privileges, nor subsequently classified as belonging to a warrior elite. To understand the Bugkalot impetus towards engaging in headhunting we must look beyond matters of social prestige.

More than half of my elderly, male informants claimed to have participated actively in these killings and almost all people who had been born into a Bugkalot community before the 1970s had first-person accounts of *ngayó*—as killer, as eyewitness, or as survivor. Though headhunting was in decline alongside the emerging evangelization in the 1960s, it continued, though on a much lesser scale, even after the socio-economic incorporation of the Bugkalot people into the economy of the Philippine state (Yang 2011). A friend and primary informant of mine, Tó’paw, whose accounts inform much of the following, carried out *ngayó* as late as 1993. And during my last visit in the field in January 2011, in the last stage of my fieldwork, two beheaded men were found in the mountain interior (see Mikkelsen forthcoming).

Attempting to explain what prompted their male informants to engage in ritual killing, the Rosaldos focused on the desire of Bugkalot men to be like those among their peers who had previously taken a head. Envy (*avet*) was thereby conceptualized as a social engine that continually created ‘sameness’ among peers (M. Rosaldo 1980, 140). Thus, a striking feature of headhunting was that it was carried out without at any point invoking any spirits, gods, or ancestors. Rather, the Rosaldos claimed, the Bugkalot referred to their individual *desire*, that is, a craving for accomplishing the same as their peers had, whereby they could cast off the feelings of despair and shame that caused anger and unrest. Michelle Rosaldo noticed that certain inherent aspects of male personhood were tied up with the beheading and she noticed that local conceptualizations of *ngayó* often revolved around ideas of emotional states: the heaviness of the heart (*g’nawa*) and anger (*ligét*) (see M. Rosaldo 1980, 1983). She argued that *ligét* increased when the egalitarian ideals of “sameness” are breached. *Ngayó*, she argues, is the instrument that transforms ‘the “shameful” weight of childhood into the ease and the respectful “shame” appropriate to adults’ (1983, 146). Several of the intriguing ideas presented by the Rosaldos need, however, to be critically addressed. For instance, as Peter Metcalf

pointed out, the act itself seems almost completely arbitrary since the Rosaldos do not explain which attributes inherent to the specific act of the ritual beheading have made it the violence of choice among the Bugkalot (Metcalf 1996, 274).

I suggest that the *ngayó* is in fact far from arbitrary. However, to grasp the significance of the specific act of the ‘cut’ requires us to move beyond the depiction of *ngayó* as a uniformly accepted, pristine, traditional practice, as it is depicted in the writings of the Rosaldos. In fact, in the following, we will see what might be gained from seeing *ngayó* as an act of transgression—or even an act of murder—rather than an unambiguously endorsed act. By employing such terms, I seek to decisively depict *ngayó* as a morally problematic act.

Pity and Terror

Anthropologists rarely deal analytically with the moral implications of headhunting. By examining the anthropological literature on ritual killing and traditional headhunting (e.g., Ellen 2002; George 1996; Hoskins 1996) one is left with the impression that such practices have little impact on the killers—besides gaining various social privileges. Headhunting among the Bugkalot, *ngayó*, seems to turn this around: the kill did have a profound effect on the Bugkalot man, but the successful headhunting raid did not lift him above other men in social status. Rather, the common feature that connected the various cases of *ngayó* was that *ngayó*, in all cases, became the man’s response to outside forces.

What often surprised me during interviews was that while the stories of headhunting raids depicted a form of hyper-masculinity, the men who told me about their experiences frequently included details that directly went against the image of masculinity as the ability to maintain one’s composure and remain unaffected. The men would tell me about intimate details that would in other contexts be considered shameful. Vomiting from fear, crying in sheer pity. The accounts drew an image of expeditions that had involved dread, unease, and indecision. The men appeared to oscillate between states of profound terror—to the point of throwing up and fainting—and feelings of potency and ecstasy. The latter was especially related to the act of tossing the head to the ground with all the force that the cutters, *dima memomotog* (lit. ‘the ones who cut’) could muster. Following this act, the cutter would humiliate the victim verbally, hurling insults at the dead body. However, before this act, leading up to the actual kill, they described in detail, without having been requested to do so, how some men would sometimes ‘freeze’ or, at other times, throw up or even faint. However, the most common story had to do with men who went berserk—that is, rather than killing one person, they would, for instance, attack a home and kill a whole family in an act of uncontrollable violence. Michelle Rosaldo argues, however, that it is not unproblematic to approach the emotional life of Bugkalot headhunters through Western metaphors. The headhunter who suddenly finds himself unable to move in front of his victim would, by the ‘naïve psychologist,’ be described as ‘frozen with fear.’ Having been trained as an anthropologist within a particularistic American tradition, she forcefully advocates for the virtue of not applying Western concepts to a local, native context. Thus, Rosaldo comments that such a translation of emotional states between cultures is ethnographically invalid—and for this reason, ‘headhunting paralysis stands



unexplained' (M. Rosaldo 1983, 138). I believe, on the other hand, that understanding the violent effects of *ngayó* requires us to draw lines between widely different ethnographic contexts and traditions of thought.

For instance, *ngayó* finds a perhaps odd analogy in the writings of the 19th century British writer, Thomas De Quincey, who identified a transcendental, cathartic capacity in murder. In his 1827 essay 'On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts,' (2009) De Quincey saw the act of murder as a way of breaking with the conventional world, which made murder similar to a work of art. However, for murder to be considered art, it had to be as useless as art. This point is made in relation to John Williams's mass-murders of two families in Ratcliffe Highway, London, in December 1811. Above all, Williams's violent rampage, according to De Quincey, was purposeless and, apparently, inexplicable. For instance, the killer did not know his victims and did not steal anything from the households. As the murder could not be tied to motives of any sort, it brought about a perfect transgressive experience on behalf of the killer. Murder, De Quincey asserted, created an aesthetic suspension from the world through a break with the ethical. These aesthetic qualities of murder lie in its ability to 'cleanse the heart by the means of pity and terror' (ibid., 32). The murder that was resolutely carried out represented a cathartic experience in the killer, relieving him from repressed sentiments and establishing emotional equilibrium.

Empathizing with the Victim

De Quincey's depiction of the act of murder seems to have more in common with *ngayó* than the varieties of headhunting described elsewhere in Southeast Asia. While the Rosaldos asserted in all their accounts that the dehumanization of the victim within the context of *ngayó* was a fundamental prerequisite for the act to take place in all their accounts—as well as in the accounts I have recorded—the dehumanization in fact took place *after* the act. For instance, Renato Rosaldo relates how the headhunters would mockingly refer to the dead victim with the same word that denotes the spot where one urinates (Rosaldo in Burket, Girard and Smith 1987, 245). However, across the accounts that were given by former headhunters it was clear that empathy with the victim shaped the experience. As my friend and informant, Tó'paw, explained to me:

‘I was around twenty years old at the time that I went with my father and the Elders. It was my younger brother who would now cut. We walked for many days and we needed only little rice, our feet were light. When we were very far away we found a trail. Then we came to a place by the river where people came to cross. We then waited until the next evening when a man and a woman stopped to rest. They had come to the mountains to fetch rattan and they were now on their way down [from the mountains] [...] We killed the man.’

Tó’paw made a motion with his hands as if he held a spear, indicating that the man had been speared to death. He carried on:

‘My younger brother was the one who cut him. [My brother] then tossed the head. That is our custom, as you know. And then the other, the woman, was for my uncle. We tied her with the rattan. But before killing the woman, my uncle cut off one of her legs. I remember how I felt pity, oh, how I pitied her. She screamed and so we killed her. My uncle cut and tossed the head.’

The subsequent part of Tó’paw’s story supported the observations made by the Rosaldos: as the unruly forces of *ligét* had been cast off, Tó’paw explained how he gained control over his emotions and his body. Now, being untouched by the people around him, he no longer knew anger and shame. But what the Rosaldos do not focus on is the pity which headhunters felt towards their victims—their empathetic involvement with the victims.

What De Quincey claimed (and, arguably, the reason his writings appear so controversial) was that murder, in his view, offered a ‘sublime effect’ when applied decisively. But this required that the human victim must not be denied its status as exactly that: a human. In this sense, the form of killing that he explores deviates from headhunting as it is known within the ethnographic literature. It has been a common assumption among anthropologists that headhunting and other forms of trophy taking of human body parts was related to either a problematic ‘humanness’ of neighbouring tribes (Mckinley 1976) or directly linked to dehumanizing practices (Harrison 2006, 2012). In her treatise on beheadings, the historian Frances Larson points out that the ‘physical detachment of a person’s head is often preceded by an assumed *social* detachment that separates the perpetrator from the victim’ (Larson 2014, 270). Larson writes that such social detachment may, for instance, be expressed through ideologies of racism through which the victims are represented as subhuman. For example, the Marind-anim of Southern New Guinea classified all non-Marind peoples as ‘semi-human objects of headhunt’ (Mckinley 1976, 111). The act of beheading the enemy involved removing their humanness. Humanness, Robert Mckinley suggested, posed a phenomenological threat within a cosmological system where outsiders were considered as non-human. Yet, the inescapable, empirical fact of the humanness of the outsider kept ‘putting humanness where it should not be.’ Thus, by making sure that a critical human component of the enemy—his head—belonged to one’s own society, the Marind maintained ontological order and made sure that things were no longer ‘out of place’ (cf. Douglas 1966). It had to do with bringing the inconvenient humanness of the theoretically nonhuman ‘back’ into society where it belongs. By doing so they rescued an

entire ideological system from being destroyed by its own inherent contradictions (Mckinley 1976, 116-117). Likewise, the Iban of Borneo used headhunting to incorporate their enemies into the village and, thus, into the world of kinship, fertility, and social reproduction. Following a war raid the severed head of slain enemies were treated in a friendly way after they were brought to the village; this involved the offering of food, wine, betel, and tobacco—and keeping the heads warm during cold nights (ibid.).

Simon Harrison (2006) has recently shown that not only have human skulls been used as trophies among some indigenous Amazonian, Southeast Asian, and Melanesian societies; he argues, that the trophy-taking practices among allied servicemen in the Pacific War closely resembled those one might find within traditional headhunting societies. The use of body parts, he argues, may occur in a wide variety of settings in which this type of imagery of predation is employed (Harrison 2006, 818). The use of trophies is thereby closely tied to the perception of the enemy as something ‘less-than-human.’ This was the case in the nineteenth century in southern and eastern Africa, where the sport of trophy hunting was a popular leisure pursuit among colonial officials. The British and German soldiers in these areas also beheaded Africans and kept their skulls as trophies (Harrison 2006, 819). Evidently such acts of violence should be understood from the perspective of the racist regime under which they were carried out. Similarly, the war in the Pacific was mapped strongly onto social divisions of race. Harrison argues that one of the conditions that is required to make human trophy-taking occur within any given society is that the human status of the enemy is denied to begin with; thus, the rendering of victims into ‘sub-humans’ is a necessary step before such violence can be executed.

The Bugkalot case does not support this notion. *Ngayó* was not directed at a specific category of people or non-people; besides living up to the criteria of not being part of the assailant’s immediate family, the victims did not belong to a certain category of humans. The victims were neither dehumanized nor classified as enemies. The Elders who escorted the raids attempted to find victims—men, women, and children alike—to whom there was no animosity. Furthermore, I was told that the victims could not belong to the ethnic group known as *negrilos* who lived in the northeastern part of mountains and whom many Bugkalots regarded with disdain due to their black skin and nomadic living. Rather, what was important was that victims were chosen towards whom the headhunter could establish an empathetic relation.

Rethinking Empathy

Day after day, listening to men talking about the headhunting raids of the past made these acts stand out as something unreal, as if listening to fictions. Because of the uncanny ordinariness evoked through such stories, listening to them was—to use one of Michael Taussig’s metaphors—‘like watching a sunken world underwater’ (Taussig 1987, 39). I was gazing at a hazy, anaesthetized past that made me, at first, blind towards questions of morality, transgression, and empathy. For this reason, I opened this paper with the words of *Tó’paw*, who explained that as time had passed the significance of *ngayó* had changed. For most people today it was just a story; when seen through the mists of history, what was left was only the impression that headhunting was a neatly

organized event, which followed the same format since time immemorial and which never deviated from a certain ritual structure. In fact, Tó'paw explained to me, this missed the entire idea of *ngayó*. It never went according to the plan and it was supposed to be difficult. The difficult aspect, I have argued, is related to the fundamentally transgressive character of *ngayó*.

In an important sense, Tó'paw's depiction of how headhunting is conceived among the younger generations mirrors how headhunting is portrayed within anthropology. Rather than approaching it as a morally ambiguous practice—thus allowing the violence to contain the same degree of complexity as violence in a Western context—it is imagined as a uniformly accepted, pristine, traditional practice. First of all, this reproduces the idea that 'ritual violence' within indigenous communities around the world ended with the introduction of Christian morals (Willerslev 2009). Thereby Christianity becomes related to a civilizing order and new moral awareness that renders violence problematic and transgressive (see also Yang 2011; Harris 1994). I propose, however, that the problematic aspects of ritual killing should not be understood exclusively as a post-conversion phenomenon. Rather, as Simon Harrison has recently argued, the use of parts of the human body as trophies of war has been widely practiced also by soldiers in modern times. He thereby shows that rather than being an irrational and savage feature of premodern and primitive warfare, there is something about trophy taking—and especially the taking of heads—that transcends the assumed boundaries between modern and premodern societies.

Secondly, this idea of the pre-Christian moral void renders us unable to properly grasp what provided *ngayó* with its transgressive impetus. Headhunting was, I argue, an act that should be grasped in all its moral ambiguity: it gained its impact on the 'cutter' due to the empathically conditioned relationship that he violated. Thus, headhunting, I suggest, does not involve a *suspension* of the ethical. It is thereby empathy itself that contributes meaning to violence.

Empathy is commonly assumed to be a universally shared feature of the human personality that helps to maintain a baseline of peaceful interaction among humans. By putting yourself in another's place, even a stranger's place, you achieve a bodily sensation of the person's experience in given situation. We *empathize* with this person. And this, we believe, establishes a connection to this person, which involves a pre-linguistic demand to help and protect. However, this assumption may be challenged through *ngayó* as a violent act that gains its significance from its inherent transgressive nature. This article has attempted to approach empathy as both an antithetic detergent to violence and, yet, paradoxically motivating violent acts by imbuing such acts with transgressive meaning. Thereby, empathy as a form of compassion may be linked to radical forms of violence.

The common feature that connected the various cases of *ngayó* was that *ngayó*, in all cases, became the man's attempt to achieve a heightened sense of autonomy. Thus, to reach a more comprehensive understanding of *ngayó*, we should place the faculty of empathy at the *centre* of this practice. And rather than simply seeing empathy as the detached ability to put oneself in the other's stead, empathy should also involve an

emotional engagement. Therefore, rather than referring to headhunting as ‘ritual killing,’ I have deliberately presented *ngayó* as a specific form of *murder*.

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