

## The Amazonian wars

Vincent HIRTZEL

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### DISCUSSION

**Christophe Darmangeat:** There is something about the Tupi that puzzles me. Namely, the contrast between the scale of their operations—we read that they set out in groups of several thousands to burn entire villages—and the fact that the prisoners are seem to be brought back sparingly. If the aim had been to provide a steady supply of prisoners to everyone, we would expect there to have been several in the villages at the same time. And whenever we read about this, we get the impression that they only hold one at a time until they end up killing them. Maybe I missed something? If not, Pierre [Lemonnier] may have some insight on this point, but the very strange practice of going to kill people to take their name because it is considered important is also found on the south coast of New Guinea. There, people don't do it specifically to give it to other people, they do it for initiations, but it's somewhat similar. I don't know if we can say that the same causes produce the same effects, but in any case, it is not unique. And faced with all this nebula that revolves around headhunting, the materialist in me, who only sleeps with one eye open (if that), would tend to see the fact that in societies where there is no growth, which reproduce globally on the same scale, one encounters various fantasies around the idea that if you want life to develop your own group, then you have to take it from elsewhere, in the right place, and do it the right way, with the right processes, so that it benefits your group. It seems to me that in headhunting and related matters, this is the common thread—which everyone then elaborates on a bit in their own way. This even includes the surprising idea that what really matters is to go out and take names. For us, it's kind of astonishing, but for those who practice it, it makes perfect sense.

**Pierre Lemonnier:** Regarding the Marind-Anim, there is a 1,000-page book called *Dema*. Actually, what people took wasn't the name itself, but the last words spoken by

a person. They would arrive with a weapon whose name I have forgotten, strike the opponent on the skull and cut off his head. So, a lot of people were called: “Aaarghrrr!” or something like that—that's what van Baal reports, and he isn't joking. So this was how names were taken. Much of this information has been lost, but when B. Blackwood, a lady from the Pitt Rivers Museum, landed in the heart of New Guinea in 1936 in a two-seater biplane, front position (can you imagine what that's like?). She relates: “We set off, we cut off his arms and legs, and then his head.” They cut off his head to eat the eyes, the tongue and the brain. The Fore are another people who eat brains. They are well known because they were the ones who had Kreutzfeld-Jacob disease, which appears at a rate of around 1 in a million for no known reason, and which is related to mad cow disease. The last known cannibal feast took place in 1957. Today we know very well why the Fore—or more precisely, the women and young boys—ate their own dead: it was seen as an act of absolute love. It was to internalize them, just as the terrifying Ankave ombo internalize their maternal relatives. Eating the brain of your grandfather or your older brother inevitably changes your identity. What's truly appalling are the prion diseases and slow viruses. There is obviously an anthropology to be done, of who absorbs whom, who absorbs what, how, etc. What C. Fausto and others write about the Amazon, I had completely forgotten, is absolutely incredible in terms of transformation. When we think that it is transformed in a logical way, we call it “structural”. But sometimes we manage to demonstrate it, sometimes not. Among the Anga, there were people who drank—it is objectively disgusting—cadaveric fluid through a straw, and things of that kind. But no one has ever asked: “What does it do to you?” Nobody knows the ontological register, and how ingesting the neighbor's cadaveric fluid transforms the person. Eating the enemy's

raw liver, or right arm, yes, that makes sense, it's easy enough for traditional anthropologists to understand. But we don't have things as extraordinary as the ones Vincent [Hirtzel] just described!

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