

# Brill's Encyclopedia of Taiwan

## Head-Hunting

(984 words)

The English term “head-hunting” implies that it was a kind of hunting, but unlike hunting, head-hunting was rarely if ever for the provision of food; “head-hunters” in pre-state indigenous communities in Southeast Asia and Austronesia, including in Taiwan, were not cannibals.

A clue to its function is that it was practiced on the Taiwan “mainland” but not by the Tao on tiny Orchid Island, implying that it was a way of protecting territory from occupation by out-groups. Another functional explanation is that head-hunting was part of in-group politics, as a function of age. Elders led head-hunting expeditions to assert leadership and to test young men for bravery, battle prowess, and leadership potential. Young men joined expeditions to demonstrate the same qualities to peers, particularly marriage candidates.

How did head-hunters conceive of head-hunting? Native terminology is suggestive. The Atayal term *mgaga*, literally “to practice” (*m-*) “morality” (*gaga*), suggests that to the Atayal head-hunting was a moral practice. Head-hunters may have thought of this practice as a way of getting “revenge” against out-groups, but they were also thinking of their standing in their own communities, in “religious” terms. To Atayalic peoples (including Atayal, Sediq, and Truku), a man had to head-hunt to be a “real man.” Such a man had the right to cross a “spirit bridge” into the afterlife, where he would join the ancestors. He enjoyed privileges in this lifetime, too: receiving a facial tattoo on his chin and attaching his victim’s hair to the scabbard of his machete, both of which externalized, and magically enhanced, his personal potency. A successful head-hunting expedition empowered the entire community, because the head contained the victim’s vital energy, which would help ensure a good harvest and protect against disease. (Indeed, colonial officials noticed a spike in head-hunting attacks during the 1918 influenza pandemic.) The head also contained the victim’s personhood. Rituals following a successful head-hunt were carried out to befriend the victim, who was asked to become a protector of the community, even an honorary ancestor.

Although there was variation from culture to culture, even from village to village, head-hunting was everywhere a suite of ritual practices in which the entire community participated. An expedition might be proposed, but the signs still had to be right before a head-hunting party could proceed; a dream and the flight or call of a bird familiar might be signs of success or failure. There were also taboos to observe: sex and weaving were forbidden; a new fire had to be started and could not be allowed to go out. (Unsuccessful expeditions were blamed on a failure to respect such taboos.) If a head was obtained it was brained, cleaned in a stream, and carried back in a special net bag. Torches were lit and, when the party was almost home, gunshots fired in the air. In the village, the head was placed in the center of a “skull shelf” and the victim befriended with gifts of speech, food, and drink. Wine was fed into the head’s mouth, collected, and ingested. Villagers sang and danced and feasted, sometimes for days on end. They also made ritual objects in the victim’s honor, for instance a spirit flag or ladder. The paraphernalia of a successful expedition were kept as talismans.

Colonialism changed the dynamics of head-hunting, from the Dutch era on. While indigenous out-groups continued to be targeted, encroaching settlers or, by the late 19th c., camphor loggers were also targeted, especially after state-constructed barriers to encroachment were deconstructed by the state in the late Qing. In Taiwanese Mandarin, head-hunting was discussed from the perspective of settlers or loggers, in terms of *chūcǎo*, meaning “to come out” (*chū*) of the “grass” (*cǎo*). Fear and loathing of “savages” who might leap out of the grass at any time led to their dehumanization. There are reports from the early 20th c. of settlers eating indigenous “meat.” To the extent that the Japanese colonial authorities had a mission of civilization, they tried to put a stop to head-hunting and revenge cannibalism alike. When indigenous communities were forced to submit to the authorities from the late 1890s to the mid-1910s, head-hunting was forbidden along with related practices like tattooing. But the authorities also incited head-hunting expeditions as part of a strategy of divide and conquer, for instance in the aftermath of the Musha Incident. Mona Rudo and the other Tgdaya Sediq warriors who attacked the Japanese at Musha on October 27, 1930 may have understood what they were doing as *mgaya*, the Sediq cognate of *mgaga*. Toda Sediq warriors who were allowed to attack defenseless rebel Tgdaya survivors on April 25, 1931 in the Second Musha Incident may also have understood their attack as a moral practice, but they also collected bounties priced according to the rank of the victim. Head-hunting became bounty hunting. There is a photograph of Japanese officers and Toda warriors squatting behind a pile of about a hundred Tgdaya heads.

Since 1930 head-hunting has had an entirely symbolic value. While the legend of the Chinese folk hero Wu Feng – who persuaded the Alishan “savages” to give up head-hunting by giving them his own head – originated at a time when indigenous people were still head-hunting, the practice was history by the time the feature film *Wu Feng* was released in 1962. By 1962, head-hunting was a metaphor for primitive practice: to become civilized, the “savages” in the film have to abandon indigenous traditions like head-hunting and adopt the Chinese way of life. Indigenous people, as well, could use head-hunting symbolically. Reenactments of head-hunting rituals using proxy heads have been held by indigenous elites not just to perform resistance to Han Taiwanese colonialism but also to assert their leadership in the community, both to outsiders and to local people. Ordinary indigenous people, most of whom are Christians, may disapprove of these rituals. In this way, head-hunting is still a part of indigenous politics.

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## **Bibliography**

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