

## **Making sense of the incomprehensible: rethinking headhunting and related forms of ritual violence in Southeast Asia**

Conveners: Kaj Århem, University of Gothenburg & Uppsala University; Magnus Fiskesjö, Cornell University

Email: [kajarhem@yahoo.se](mailto:kajarhem@yahoo.se), [magnus.fiskesjo@cornell.edu](mailto:magnus.fiskesjo@cornell.edu), [nikarhem@yahoo.se](mailto:nikarhem@yahoo.se)

### **Single session panel**

Headhunting and related forms of ritual violence was historically widespread in Southeast Asia. There is an abundance of ethnographic material on headhunting in the region, mostly old and some of doubtful quality. There is also a variety of interpretative efforts – structuralist, culturalists, historical and historical-materialist – to make sense of this material. Janet Hoskins' 1996 volume provides an excellent state of the art report on the subject in the late 1990s. Since then, theoretical developments in the discipline have opened up new and promising analytical avenues to tackle the phenomenon anew. Of particular interest is the work surging from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's pioneering studies on native Amazonian animism and cosmopolitics – all forming part of a single theoretical project to intellectually grasp radically other conceptual worlds.

The notion of ontological predation developed by Viveiros de Castro and Carlos Fausto with reference to the historical practice of warfare cannibalism in Amazonia seems to be particularly pertinent for exploring headhunting in Southeast Asia. The notion refers to the capturing and incorporation of the victim's soul into the killer's personal and collective self – a cosmopolitical strategy for converting others into selves and turning potency from without into vitality within. Among its potential virtues, the concept of ontological predation would seem to offer a theoretical framework for bringing together and subsuming the distinctive Southeast Asian and Amazonian (and possibly other) regional forms of ritual violence under a single analytical category.

Panelists are invited to rethink current interpretations of headhunting and related forms of ritual violence in the light of the work on ontological predation in Amazonia (and elsewhere) but also to critically discuss the notion and propose novel approaches to the subject in the context of empirical material from Southeast Asia. We encourage synthetic and comparative reviews as well as papers on specific groups in Mainland and Insular Southeast Asia that have a documented historical record of headhunting or similar practices, including their contemporary manifestations in ritual, narrative and imagery.