

The Killed God and His Killing Rituals. The Leitmotif of Adolf E. Jensen

Bernhard Streck

Universität Leipzig, Institut für Ethnologie

2018

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Streck, Bernhard, 2018. "The Killed God and His Killing Rituals. The Leitmotif of Adolf E. Jensen", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : article1243.html

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

© UMR9022 Héritages (CY Cergy Paris Université, CNRS, Ministère de la culture)/DIRI, Direction générale des patrimoines et de l'architecture du Ministère de la culture. (All rights reserved).

Your use of this article indicates your acceptance of the Bérose site (www.berose.fr) terms and conditions of use, available [here](#).

Visited on 29 March 2024 at 14:26

When anthropology is said to create its own sources, the historian of written sources feels it to be a deficit, and the credibility of anthropological data is perceived as being correspondingly suspect among philologists. [1] Anthropologists, on the other hand, often see the need to create fixed texts out of vague orality as freedom for creativity, [2] especially, to cite Paul Feyerabend (1924-1994), [3] if the norms of cultural science conventions are not to become dogma. The peculiar charm of anthropology, however, has something else in its favour: its texts can be as exotically attractive as the exotic cultures that they attempt to describe; and they can cause one to shudder, the transported truth being as horrendous as the origin of that truth.

Those who proceeded beyond the compulsory stages of academic initiation into American cultural anthropology, Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and the sociological neofunctionalism of the 1980s to delve deeper into the discipline, might, with some luck, discover the thanatological ties between anthropology and classics abandoned as all too unfashionable by post-war German social studies. With this I mean cultural morphology, which, like diffusionism, from which it emerged as a more focussed variation, saw the contemporary world as a sum of cultural fragments. Unlike the latter, it not only ordered these fragments by origin and historical trajectory, but also tried to fit them back together. Finding 'sense in the nonsense' was the leitmotif of these cultural restorers, and their restorations have the above-mentioned charm.

This charm is illustrated here based on the example of the killed god, the 'getötete Gottheit',

which in 1965 – the year of his death – Adolf Ellegard Jensen (1899-1965) added to the third edition of his first major work *Das religiöse Weltbild einer frühen Kultur* from 1948. [4] Together with his second central work, also published in several editions and his only book translated into English as *Myth and Cult among Primitive Peoples* (1963), [5] it represents the pinnacle of German cultural morphology, which can be traced back to Leo Frobenius' (1873-1938) *Ursprung der afrikanischen Kulturen* (*Origin of African Cultures*) first published in 1898. [6] It was Frobenius who enticed the natural scientist Jensen [7] to switch scholarly sides and eventually succeed him. As a very intuitive and expressionistic scholarly approach, cultural morphology had long had difficulties finding acceptance in academia – in spite of excellent connections with conservative and artistic circles. It was in the period of the two world wars that it finally found a foothold to become the *ecclesia triumphans* of German anthropology when all else lay in shambles.

Wandering through the rubble evidently elevates the need for holistic world views, reflections beyond the phenomenological world, an 'Eros of distance', as Jensen's kindred spirit, the cultural psychologist Ludwig Klages (1872-1956) once called it. [8] In this, Frobenius' students, for whom the collapse of civilization began in 1914, were thoroughly trained. In the 1920s, mythologists, scholars of the classics and anthropologists complemented one another in the development of an understanding of culture as a preface to death. This was demonstrated paradigmatically in the Eleusinian mysteries and confirmed in the many initiation rituals recorded from around the world, which Jensen summarized and interpreted in his *Beschneidung und Reifezeremonien bei Naturvölkern* (*Circumcision and Initiation Ceremonies among Primitive Peoples*, 1933) [9] as being a journey of the dead or a dance of death. These chains of repetition are woven like ornamental bands through his descriptions of the tribal cultures of island India [10] and East Africa; [11] the iterated elements are spirals or labyrinths, festive death and killing practices of a millennia-long archaic period that extends into the hearts of ancient civilizations and book religions. [12]

The killed god is reconstructed by Jensen as a founding father who in the depths of the past emerged in the consciousness of man as a deified plant to trigger his *Ergriffenheit* – most often translated as 'emotion', but rather a being seized like a obsessed commitment. This is the ingenious feeling of creativity that in Frobenius' theory of degeneration would eventually vanish and dissipate through constant repetition to become mere 'application'. After the transition from an uncertain hunter-gatherer existence to a settled, horticultural way of life, the most indestructible core is the insight that crops must die if they are to be harvested. The harvest is thus a thousandfold murder to feed thousandfold lives. When this paradox was understood by archaic man as the circle of life, only one cultural imperative remained: repetition, in everyday work and in festive ceremony, as the declaration of acceptance of the way of the world and attested to in myth and ritual. Jensen's cultural man is condemned to recreate this 'ur-drama', this original drama. To do so, he needs surrogates to play the role of the killed god, and he finds them in pigs and other sacrificial animals, in chosen or appropriately marked girls and boys, in every sacrifice of a once global headhunting tradition, and finally in the sacred king, the crowned and deified self-sacrifice.

Unlike many other sacrifice theorists, [13] Jensen has no interest in barter, trade or balance in human dealings with deities, nor in gratitude for divine creation, as Christian anthropologists tend to project. [14] The cult is nothing but memory, confirmation and repetition; the sacrifice deifies both the sacrificer and the sacrificee in its act. Identity gives way to metamorphosis, its heavenly form is the moon, which is and then is not, and embodies the perpetuity of change. Jensen described culture built around the cult of the killed god as being lunar, and described it as a conscious bond of fate between heavenly bodies, gods, spirits, humans, animals and plants that can easily shift their respective roles. The empirical fragments that form the basis for this grandiose reconstruction of a global culture spanning tens of thousands of years come from the Moluccan Islands, New Guinea, the Indians of Peru and California, the Inuit, the Fang of central Africa, from Zimbabwean cultures, the archaic high cultures of the New World and above all the Old World with its many gods of death (Tammuz, Marduk, Osiris, Attis, Dionysus, Adonis, Eros or Baldur) among whom the self-sacrificing Jesus Christ is probably the best known.

This last link to the official and dominant understanding of religion was left by the practising Protestant Jensen to the 'experts'. He was probably unnerved enough by his own model in which 'innocent' girls were raped, killed and eaten – all in the name of a sacred act of memorialization. If genders are constructed culturally, as feminists and gender scholars suggest today, then the role of lunar sacrifice, despite the above-cited list of divine heroes and the myriad of roosters, rams, 'tragedy singing' he-goats and bulls whose fate they shared, can also be female in myth and ritual. First and foremost among them is the 'coconut girl', Hainuwele of the Wemale of Ceram Island, who is trampled to death in a spiral dance so that she can gift her people life. The men, the perpetrators and the killers, join together in secret societies, ritually consolidate their complicity and celebrate their pomposity and arrogance in danced speeches. For Jensen, headhunters are like predator animals who attack their weaker victims from behind; they murder without thought for heroism and without shame – like the 'laughing lions' in Nietzsche's anti-bible "Thus spoke Zarathustra". [15] In the beginning was murder, and the murdered became food, the terrible original sin became a life and death cycle, an order of being. But the sacrifice does not disappear, it lives on in the sacrificers. 'You killed her, so now you have to eat her', say Hainuwele's parents to their neighbours. 'You are what you eat' is what one would say today. In place of punishment and penance for man's original sin, as the Bible teaches us, the archaic world saw it in positive terms, practised acceptance of the given order. Ritual repetition of the original murder, so Jensen believed, was the source of salvation. The religions of the old horticulturalists did not promise redemption, did not feign hope or threaten a Judgement Day with its tribunals and punishments or eternal rapture for the righteous and the redeemed. The memory of the killed god and the re-enactment of the original murder sufficed to create peace of mind among the practitioners of religions without theology. [16]

Jensen knew that the realities of life allowed for other spiritual encounters. Different cultures and time periods thus highlighted select aspects of the incomprehensible whole. The various 'leitmotifs' that individual cultures thus identified, however, took up so much

bandwidth that the people forget everything else. It is at this point that Jensen ventures an explicit reference to his time: how much did the third German Reich (1933-45) trample underfoot in pursuit of a single goal?! Even for proponents of cultural morphology, anthropology is learning through observation. Jensen participated in many research expeditions, [17] he also fought in both world wars as a soldier and mourned fallen colleagues and co-workers. And on Sundays he prayed to the Lamb of God hanging from his cross. Put together, this gave rise to a *model of an earlier culture* pieced together from the incomprehensibilities of a later one that was recognized and respected by many scholars in Central Europe for a generation.

Half a century after Friedrich Nietzsche declared the god revealed in the Bible to be dead and the search for a new one without hope, Jensen found a deity figure he called 'Dema', a term he borrowed from the Marind of New Guinea. [18] While the self-professed modern anthropologists strove to explain history, society and religion 'without the hypothesis of God' (Krader), [19] Jensen believed that the longest stretch of human cultural history had passed under the watchful eye of Dema gods. They were not beseeched, but they were not besmirched either. They were simply pigs that multiplied because they were constantly being slaughtered, again and again. This is the anthropological truth that Jensen found when wandering through the rubble of post-war Frankfurt am Main in which his institute and his museum were buried. He did at least as much for the understanding of the lunar character of German societies with their regular ups and downs as he did for the reconstruction of Marind and Wemale cosmologies that hardly anyone can remember today.

[1] The present essay is a revised version of Bernhard Streck's: "Die getötete Gottheit" von Ad. E. Jensen' in: Kapfer, Reinhard, Marie-José van der Loo, Werner Petermann, Margarete Reinhart (eds.). 1997. *Wegmarken. Eine Bibliothek der ethnologischen Imagination*. Edition Trickster im Peter Hammer Verlag, pp. 131-134. It was translated into English by Andreas Hemming.

[2] See Münzel, Mark. 2017. *Jaguar und Wildschwein, eine Fabel für Menschen. Oder: Der Aufstieg des Jaguars zum Himmel, ein Karriereleitfaden für Wissenschaftler*. GISCAS Occasional Paper Series 9, Göttingen: Georg-August-Universität. A sympathetic critique of the practice of academic reconstruction with the help of old cultural architects: Dinslage, Sabine/Sophia Thubauville (eds.). 2017. *Seeking out wise old men. Six decades of Ethiopian Studies at the Frobenius Institute*. Berlin: Reimer.

[3] Feyerabend, Paul. 1970. Against Method. In: *Minnesota Studies in The Philosophy of Science*. Nr. 4 (Theories and Methods of Physics and Psychology, ed. by Michael Radner and Stephan Winkur), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 17-130.

[4] Jensen, Adolf Ellegard. 1948. *Das religiöse Weltbild einer frühen Kultur*. Stuttgart: Strecker & Schröder.

[5] Jensen, Adolf Ellegard. 1963. *Myth and Cult among Primitive Peoples*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963; Jensen, Adolf Ellegard. 1951. *Mythos und Kult bei Naturvölkern. Religionswissenschaftliche Betrachtungen*. Wiesbaden: Steiner (New editions: 1960, 1991).

[6] Jensen's unpublished dissertation was titled: "Max Plancks erkenntnistheoretischer Standpunkt im Gegensatz zu Ernst Machs Positivismus". (University of Kiel, 1 July 1923).

[7] Cf. Streck, Bernhard. 2014. *Leo Frobenius. Afrikaforscher, Ethnologe, Abenteurer*. Frankfurt am Main: Societätsverlag.

[8] Klages, Ludwig. 1922. *Vom kosmogonischen Eros*. Stuttgart: Hans E. Günther, p. 93.

[9] Jensen, Adolf Ellegard. 1933. *Beschneidung und Reifezeremonien bei Naturvölkern*. Stuttgart: Strecker & Schröder.

[10] Jensen, Adolf Ellegard. 1939. *Hainuwele. Volkserzählungen von der Molukken-Insel Ceram*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann; Jensen, Adolf Ellegard. 1948. *Die drei Ströme. Züge aus dem geistigen und religiösen Leben der Wemale, einem Primitiv-Volk in den Molukken*. Leipzig: Harrassowitz.

[11] Jensen, Adolf Ellegard. 1936. *Im Landes des Gada. Wanderungen zwischen Volkstrümmern Südabessiniens*. Stuttgart: Strecker & Schröder; Jensen, Adolf Ellegard (ed.). 1959. *Altvölker Süd-Äthiopiens*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

[12] Of the innumerable examples of studies on the continued existence of archaic practices and concepts see, for example, the work of the anthropologist Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831-1880), who saw the original murder at the core of European harvest rituals: Mannhardt, Wilhelm. 1875/78. *Wald- und Feldkulte*. Berlin: Borntraeger.

[13] Cf.. Drexler, Josef. 1993. *Die Illusion des Opfers. Ein wissenschaftlicher Überblick über die wichtigsten Opfertheorien, ausgehend vom deleuzianischen Polyperspektivismusmodell*. Munich: Anacon.

[14] See Schebesta, Paul. 1961. *Ursprung der Religion. Ergebnisse der vorgeschichtlichen und völkerkundlichen Forschungen*. Berlin: Morus.

[15] Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1883/1979 *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Friedrich Nietzsche Werke in 5 Bänden, edited by Karl Schlechta. Vol. II, pp. 275-561, cit. p. 519, Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Vienna: Ullstein.

[16] Cf. Streck, Bernhard. 2013. *Sterbendes Heidentum. Die Rekonstruktion der ersten Weltreligion*. Leipzig: Eudora.

[17] To southern Africa (1928-30), Libya (1932), southern Ethiopia (1934/5), Indonesia (1937) and again to southern Ethiopia (1950/1 and 1954/5). See 'Daten zu Leben und Werk von Ad. E. Jensen'. In: Haberland, Eike/Meinhard Schuster/Helmut Straube (eds.) 1964. *Festschrift für Ad. E. Jensen*. Vol I, pp. IX-XVI. Munich: Klaus Renner.

[18] The ethnographic source on which he based this decision: Wirz, Paul. 1922/5. *Die Marind-anim von Holländisch-Süd-Neu-Guinea*. Hamburg: Friedrichsen, 2 Vols.

[19] The phrase goes back to the French mathematician and astronomer Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749-1827), who is said to have stunned Napoleon with his atheist convictions. I am indebted to Mark Münzel for pointing this out. On the philosophies of Lawrence Krader, who passed away in 1998, see Schorkowitz, Dittmar (ed.) 1995. *Ethnohistorische Wege und Lehrjahre eines Philosophen. Festschrift für Lawrence Krader zum 75. Geburtstag*. Frankfurt am Main et al.: Peter Lang.