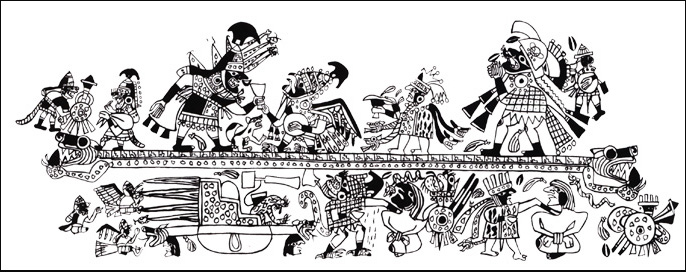
AM,S-Peru-Moche-Sacrifice

The Significance of Violence in the Moche Belief System  


**Introduction**  
  
Violence may be a concept that is universal, and that transcends time, but the context in which it occurs changes tremendously. In the case of the Moche people of coastal Peru, violent practices were integral to their way of life. Ceramic vessels, temple walls, and metallurgy are just some of the mediums that depicted acts of blood drinking, human sacrifice, and ritual decapitation. Whether all depictions of violence are religious in nature is debatable, but many can be seen in a religious context, or at least within a system of beliefs. In any case, violent activities had tremendous meaning in the lives of the Moche.  
  
Since the Moche did not have any system of writing that we know of, the material that has been found, I feel, must be interpreted liberally.

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| **tumidecor.jpg** |
| A decorated tumi, used in ritual decapitations. |

**Iconography, Symbolism, and Decapitation**  
  
The Moche portray seven supernatural creatures known as the decapitators, which include a human, monster, bird, fish, spider, crab, and scorpion (Cordy- Collins 1992). All of these creatures are depicted as decapitating a victim, but the monster is unique in that it decapitates itself occasionally. Some vessels show certain decapitators battling with each other. Many of the bird decapitators seem to be modeled after owls, keeping the theme of owls representing death or misfortune.  
  
The presence of violence does not have to be blatantly apparent in artwork. Depictions of animals, deities, and anthropomorphic creatures can convey a meaning that has roots in Moche myths. According to Jeffrey Quilter (1990), “[owls]… are commonly associated with ritual and sacrifice and often garbed in warrior’s clothing and weapons.” Owls also symbolize corpses, cemeteries and spirits of the dead. (Quilter 1990) Given the nature of the symbolism associated with the owl, it seems as though any scene depicting one could be representing a form of violence as it applies to Moche beliefs. In certain circumstances, women can also symbolize ritual and death.  
  
The Presentation theme, as it is known, is displayed at the top of the page. It displays prisoner sacrifice and blood drinking which were enacted by the Moche ceremonially. The theme originally shows up on a ceramic vessel.  
  
“The subject of the Presentation theme is the ceremonial offering of goblets that apparently were carried in procession with plate-like covers. This activity commonly is showing in association with the mutilation or sacrifice of bound, naked, human prisoners, and the organization of such scenes implies that human blood filled the chalices used in the myth and ritual that the Presentation theme represents.” (Quilter 1990)  
  
In later Moche times, art had developed into a narrative form, as opposed to simple, singular representations of an earlier era. In narrative form, “moralizing comes about because a narrative, by definition, ends with a closure in which the concluding events are a result of the actions that occur earlier in the narrative: plot creates a moral universe.” (Quilter 1997) So, depictions of violence, according to this philosophy, must have a moral nature.  
  
“Stories can describe the activities of gods and mortals as models of reality and for reality, explaining the world’s origin and the nature of human behavior.” (Quilter 1997)\*  
  
**Sacrifice and Warfare**

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| prisoners.JPG |
| Drawing of a prisoner sacrifice from a ceramic vessel. |

Much of the sacrifices made in the Moche society are attributed to the results of warfare. Sutter and Cortez (2005) identify with three different models. The first assumes that local Moche are sacrificed in ritual battles, the second assumes that victims would be conquered through state expansion, and the third assumes that victims involved “culturally similar but feuding polities, being enemy Moche warriors captured during battles with competing neighbors.” (Sutter and Cortez 2005)  
  
“The one-on-one nature of battles and the style of dress most commonly portrayed on Moche ceramics have led most scholars to suggest that these are scenes of ritual battles rather than warfare. The object of these battles, these scholars contend, was not to kill their opponents but to defeat them in ritual combat for the purpose of sacrificing them in bloodletting ceremonies.” (Sutter and Cortez 2005)  
  
Sutter and Cortez (2005) actually conclude in their findings that battling in order to provide sacrificial victims is unlikely.  
  
“This is not to suggest that victims were not sacrificed in an elaborate ceremony that was an integral part of Moche power and authority; rather, it is a rejection of the notion that such combat was staged with sacrifice as its end.” (Sutter and Cortez 2005)  
  
Since uncertainty is a fairly large part of analyzing the Moche, it is no wonder that violent acts can be blown out of proportion, or even create false impressions.  
  
“Framing Moche sacrifices as ritual acts and the products of “ritual warfare” provides a very handy trope for tourism. The blood and gore are present for the titillation of tourists, but since the slaughter is done for the sake of religion, tolerance must be allowed, the T-shirts can be bought in good conscience, and the tourist may consider that the Moche were really very nice people, after all.”  
(Quilter 2002)

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| **skull.JPG** |
| "trophy" skull |

**Non-artistic evidence for ritualistic behavior**  
  
There are few examples of Moche ritual that aren’t depicted in an art form. Two of them come by way of modified human skulls. They are what Verano, et al (1999) call “trophy” skulls. “This discovery provides additional evidence to support the argument that Moche depictions of prisoner capture and sacrifice reflect actual event, not mythological narrative.” (Verano, et al. 1999)  
The skulls belonged to people who either died while battling or being sacrificed and were modified after death (Verano, et al. 1999). These were the first example of vessels being created out of actual human skulls, and interestingly, prior to this finding archaeologists had found ceramic vessels in the form of human skulls. It should also be noted that these skulls were found near the Huaca del Sol on ceremonial grounds.  
  
 **Conclusion**  
  
Violence, as represented in archaeological findings of Moche culture, was a complex factor in the way these people lived. Modern interpretations of artifacts and features convey a convincing point that violence was not used as a means to an end. The rituals and ceremonies that occurred through the belief of supernatural beings and sanctity were grotesque and brutal in many worldviews today, but these rituals were at the center of Moche life.  
  
  
  
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\*quote is a paraphrased version of a Geertz (1979) quote.