

The Jivaro Shrunk heads from the National Museum, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Authentic or Counterfeits?

Sheila Mendonça de Souza¹, Fátima Nascimento², Karl Jan Reinhard³, Adauto Araújo⁴

¹ Escola Nacional de Saúde Pública, Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, Rua Leopoldo Bulhões, 1480 – Manguinhos, 21041.210 Rio de Janeiro – RJ - Brasil

² Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

³ Department of Ecology, University of Nebraska, Nebraska, United States of America

⁴ Escola Nacional de Saúde Pública, Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

KEY WORDS: headhunting, Amazonia, mummies, ethnographic collections, shrunken heads

Abstract

The Jivaro people from Ecuador, Amazonia, skillfully mummified human heads by shrinking them to the size of a fist. The Jivaro became famous as the Amazonian headhunters. This mummification was practiced in the context of a ritual in which individuals developed more and more spiritual power supported by the submission of their enemy souls. In the original ritual the heads were discarded or “buried” in the rivers. Historical contacts and religious conversion prohibited the practice and only a few shrunken heads can be found in museums today. Six Jivaro shrunken heads, probably from adult men with ornaments including a Caucasian, are described in this presentation. Some of them date to the 19th century, and were acquired by the Brazilian emperor. The discovery of nits and eggs of *Pediculus humanus* in those mummified scalps makes their description still more interesting. Cultural details like feather ornaments, hair styles, cordage, and other characteristics are discussed

Introduction

Headhunting practice goes back through the remote past of humankind. Many different cultures throughout the world preserved the heads of their victims in rituals, religious practices or just to demonstrate the power of the winners. In South America, headhunting is not new, the Nazca and Moche had the cult of trophy heads about 200 years BC (Cockburn et al., 1998).

The Jivaro from Ecuador, South America, were famous headhunters. After carefully planning war enterprises against their enemies, usually other Jivaro, they ambushed and killed them. The *tzantza*, or ritually prepared trophy head, was no bigger than a fist, but preserved the original features of the deceased's face. The Jivaro believed that to overwhelm the enemy's soul was more important than to kill him. The way to become strong and invincible, even immortal, was acquiring the soul power trapped in the head trophies. The *tzantza* celebration, three to four years after the headhunting, ended the enemies spiritual power cycle, leaving the powerless head to be discarded in a river, given or simply traded. Heads trade came to be intense during the XIX century, reaching European countries and high prices. The Jivaro were a trading people and after contact they included shrunken heads as an extra trade good. Besides the real head trophies, many counterfeits were made to be sold before the trade was forbidden at the beginning of the XX century. Human heads, as well as animal heads, were also prepared and sold by acculturated Jivaro and other native or non-native people, using similar or different techniques. Murders and mutilated corpses in the morgues were found without the head in Ecuador cities, before legal repression to the head trading was imposed (Turner, 1944; Aufderheide, 2003; Cockburn et al., 1998).

Otherwise, the head mummification among the Jivaro is unique and one of the more interesting embalming processes ever known, because of their ability to shrink and mummify the trophies that remained preserved for decades even in the rain forest tropical environment. Most of the heads in modern museums, come from the trading period between the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century, and many of them are in fact counterfeits.

Preparation of the trophies by Jivaro (De Graff, 1934) started in the battlefield, by cutting off the head as close as possible to the collarbone. The head was taken away and during the way back home the warrior started the embalming process. A sagittal cut at the back of the neck, and other cuts along the eyelids, the nostrils, the auditory meatus and the lips helped to peeling off the skin, reverting it to take off the bony head and its organs. The skin keeping

hair, muscle, cartilage, and connective tissue was sewn to become a bag-like piece with the eyelids, nose, lips, ears and the hair. This soft piece was heat but not boiled in water for three days, in a clay pot specially made for this purpose; the water was added tannin and other herb extracts. The head skin was taken off from the water at intervals; hot sand and stones were poured inside to burn away the excess of soft tissue. The external surface of the skin was polished with hot soft pebbles and the head was carefully modeled to keep its morphology while shrinking. The lips were perforated in three points and tied with fibers during the shrinkage; wooden sticks were positioned to keep the eyelids opened. Smoke, herbal extracts, and charcoal progressively changed the skin color to a dark brown, but the hairs generally did not change or shrink. After the shrinkage the head was properly combed and dressed with cotton threads, feathers and so on. The whole piece was reduced to the size of an orange and the skin acquired the consistency of rubber. The shrinkage and mummification was considered a spiritual experience. In Brazil, the more expressive collection of those trophies belongs to the National Museum, Rio de Janeiro.

Material and methods

Five shrunken heads of the National Museum, Rio de Janeiro are shortly described here. Their morphological characteristics are considered in details. Comparing preparation techniques, anatomical details, hairdressing, ethnic traits, associated artifacts and raw material it was possible to distinguish the authentic from the counterfeit heads.

Results of a previous paleoparasitological study (Araújo et al, 2000) were included considering that parasitological information could help to identify the nature of the objects.

Five Turner (1944) criteria to distinguish original shrunken heads were considered: three lip's perforations, traditional cotton threads, piercing in the top, absence of facial hairs and polished skin. Other criteria were added, according to the literature (De Graff, 1934; Acquaviva, 1977; Aufderheide, 2003) as following: color of the skin, position of the scalp cut, use of palm fibers for sewing, haircut, closed mouth, opened eyes, thick shrunken skin, weight of the head, earlobe perforation. Presence or absence of the above characteristics were computed for each object and associated to specific details of each head in order to classify them.

Results

The first shrunken head studied in the National Museum collection was offered by the Museu Naval in 1920 (Cat. 16531). This head has three lip perforations sewed by cotton threads tied to a cotton fringe about 30cm long. One of the piercing at the upper head is actually trespassed by an industrial thread. There is no facial hair; the skin is

polished and dark brown. Scalp is cut at the dorsal midline and has been sewn by palm fibers (tucun). Black long hair and frontal fringe remember the typical Jivaro hairdressing (Harner, 1973). Mouth is closed and eyelids are retracted, the contracted skin is thick and the head is heavy, despite its size. One small dark spot at each earlobe suggest perforation in life. Hairdressing is complete with red stained cotton cords covered by yellow/black/red toucan feathers, short fuses of carefully cut human hair and long earrings made of green beetle wings and black seeds. (Fig. 1). The long thick and straight hair has no nits.



Fig. 1 - Authentic Jivaro shrunken head with typical earrings and hairdressing.

The second head was acquired in Guayaquil, Colombia, in 1933 and donated by Aurelino A. L. Ferreira (Cat. 28597). The lips show no perforation and there is no cotton thread. Facial hairs along the upper lip and chin suggest this was a puberty boy. There is no piercing to hang the head and the skin is rough and irregular; the brown color is not homogeneous. The hair has been cut to less than 1 cm all over the head. There is no dorsal cut starting at the neck border, but four circumferential cut marks along the scalp and the forehead. The sewing with a tucun thread is partially covered by green and yellow feathers glued to the forehead and by the hair. Lips are opened and the closed eyelids have long eyelashes and eyebrows. Skin is thick and the head is heavy, there is no earlobe perforation. A neck perforation, 5mm wide, with inside reverted borders is under the left ear suggest a perimortem wound that shrank with the skin (Fig. 2). The black and thin hair shows nits. The third head was given to the Emperor's D. Pedro II, its Catalogue number has been lost. Three lip perforations and the remains of the original tucun threads used to tie the mouth can still be seen. The skin has sulci caused by the treads tying the mouth. An industrial thread is hanging from the upper piercing. There is no facial hair; the skin is polished and dark brown. A dorsal cut along the scalp is sewn with tucun and the long black hair is divided in halves. Mouth is closed and eyes are partially opened, skin is thick, the head is heavy and earlobe perforations are 5mm wide. The hair is black, medium thickness, and some nits could be found.



Fig. 2 - Shrunken head, prepared by different technique, probably non-Indian.

The fourth head was acquired from Dr. Arnaldo W. Campello, in 1939 (Cat. #29501). Three tiny and irregular lip's perforations have no fiber or thread inside. There is no upper piercing. Eyelashes, eyebrows, a curly brown moustache and beard are present, the skin is rough and pale in color. The scalp and neck have been cut at the back and sewn by the inner side with industrial cotton thread. The hair is thin, short, wavy and reddish brown. The contracted lips are closed as well as the eyelids. Skin is thick and the head is heavy, there is no earlobe perforation. Characteristics like the scalp, facial hairs and skin color indicate it is not a Native Indian but Caucasian adult man (Fig.3). He is plenty of nits.



Fig. 3 - Caucasian shrunken head. The preparation is also different from the typical Jivaro techniques.

The fifth head has no number and no associated information. It is made of a thin skin or leather, carefully molded to reproduce a curious round human head. The proportions of the facial details are not in the proper anatomical scale, and the object looks like a doll. The hair is thin, dry and brownish, no longer than 10cm, looking like animal fur. It is growing direction is inverted going from the

neck to the upper part of the head, the hair contour goes down the neck. The very thin and non contracted skin is covered by grayish black painting that simulates the polished and dark appearance of the Jivaro heads. The head is very light. Along the molded eyeballs and orbital contours short brushes of hairs simulate the eyebrows and eyelashes. The molded lips are separated by a straight cut simulating mouth aperture, a small fiber thread is passing through by two perforations. The ears and nose are roughly modeled and have no meatus or nostril. In the inside it is possible to see the skin folding due to the forced modeling, and the original pale color under the painting. This head was also positive for nits, which are similar in many primates, suggesting that a monkey skin be probably used for the fake's preparation (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 - Replica of a shrunken head, a counterfeit molded in animal skin, probably monkey.

Conclusion

Two of the five heads in the National Museum display all the characteristics proposed by Turner (1944) to identify the true Jivaro trophies. Both heads present at least 12 of the 14 characteristics proposed in this study for the same purpose. In both cases, recent changes like the industrial hanging cord or the Jivaro earrings were probably added to improve the aesthetical value of the objects that were in many exhibitions of the first half of the century. The other three heads do not fit Turner's criteria, except for the precarious lips' perforation in the Caucasian head. Less than a half of the whole set of *tzantza* characteristics could be identified in those other heads. Some of them, like thickness of the skin and weight, are actually a consequence of being real shrunken heads; others, like closed lips, number of lip perforations, or tucun fibers may only indicate the intention to reproduce the Jivaro pattern. The unpolished skin still maintaining the facial hairs point to a different preparation in the Caucasian and in the young boy. In the first one, the internal regular sewing with industrial cotton thread suggest that it was possibly prepared by someone who had access to modern techniques, like a taxidermist or a morgue assistant. In the

second one, the circumferential cut marks, above the eyebrows and back to the ears, suggest that the skull was taken off through the scalp instead of being taken off through the neck enlarged aperture.

Although it is possible to consider that even the Jivaro would use less sophisticated preparation for the heads prepared for trade purposes, in the last two cases it is possible to point divergent patterns from the Jivaro techniques suggesting other people, eventually urban people, made those heads.

It is quite interesting to notice that the typical Jivaro heads have none or only a few nits, while the non-Jivaro ones have many nits, specially the Caucasian head. Considering the prior differences it is also coherent to propose that the real *tzantza* came from grooming native individuals, and the counterfeits came from persons living in poor hygiene conditions, a common consequence of contact and urbanization.

The last head, well this is just a fake, possibly made of monkey fur, whose nits are similar to the humans nits. In museum and private collections all around the world many human shrunk heads were proved to be counterfeits. This study helped to confirm that in the

National Museum, Brazil, only two of the five heads in the ethnographic collection are real Jivaro *tzantza*; two others are real human shrunk heads, but were not prepared like the traditional *tzantza*; one of them is an obvious replica, a fake molded in animal fur.

Literature Cited

- Acquaviva, CM. 1977. *Caçadores de Cabeça*. São Paulo: Nosso Brasil.
- Araújo A, Reinhard KJ, Freire NMS, Guidon N, Dittmar K, and Ferreira LF. 2000. Ten Thousand Years of Head Lice Infection. *Parasitology Today*, 16: 269.
- Aufderheide, A. 2003. *The Scientific Study of Mummies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cockburn, A, Cockburn, E and Reyman, TA. 1998. *Mummies, Diseases and Ancient Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Graff, FW. 1934. *Os Caçadores de Cabeças do Amazonas - Sete Anos de Aventuras e de Exploração nas Florestas Virgens da América Equatorial*. Lisboa: Livraria Clássica. (coleção Os Grandes Documentários VII)
- Harner, MJ. 1973. *The Jivaro. People of the Waterfalls*. Garden City: Anchorpress.