

Rethinking Worldviews Through the Moche Blood Ceremony Ceramic Vessel: Lessons from the Past for an Environmentally Just Future

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Fig. 1: Collection: KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien; Object number: 90970; Name: unknown; Place & Community Details: Piura, Peru; Maker's Name: unknown; Materials: pottery; Collector: Eduard Wickenburg; Date collected: 1908–1910. © KHM-Museumsverband.



The Moche people lived on the arid northern coast of what is today Perú around 1,500 years ago, where they constructed villages with elaborated irrigation systems for agriculture and ceremonial centres. The north of Perú has been periodically affected by the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO), a natural event that occurs every two to seven years in the Pacific Ocean. During an El Niño ('little boy' in Spanish) event, warm currents arrive at the coast of Perú and raise the surface temperature of the ocean, causing heavy rains and, in extreme cases, flooding for months. After El Niño, there follows a La Niña ('little girl') event that is characterized by cold surface temperatures and intense droughts along the South American coast, ultimately affecting food security and the availability of potable water. Although the Moche had adapted to such climate fluctuations, they probably vanished due to the precarious conditions that followed an extreme El Niño event around the eighth century CE.¹

As part of their material culture, the Moche created painted ceramic vessels depicting portraits, mostly of warriors and religious figures, as well as plants and animals from their environment. These vessels also illustrate scenes from everyday life, including battles and ceremonies. Such fineware ceramics were used, besides for domestic purposes, in ritualistic and funerary contexts such as, for example, mortuary offerings upon a death. One of these vessels can be seen in the showcase display entitled 'Sacrifices in precarious times: from the Moche culture to the current climate crisis', exhibited at the Weltmuseum Wien between March 2022 and January 2023 as part of the TAKING CARE project. This rounded ceramic vessel is black in colour and shows a human-bodied being in relief, holding in its right hand a decapitated head and in the left a crescent-shaped blade knife (fig. 1). These scenes are not rare in Moche iconography, as they refer to the Blood Ceremony, a human sacrificial ritual in which the throat of a victim was cut, their blood collected and drunk by specific elite individuals. Through these rituals, the Moche offered human tribute to their higher powers in honour of nature, seeking to mitigate climatic and ecological disasters caused by severe El Niño events.

Human sacrifice rituals were central to the Moche's collective understanding of their physical and spiritual world, also termed *cosmovision*. The ceramic vessels related to these ceremonies frequently depict animals and plants whose ecological interactions were affected by the El Niño phenomenon, revealing not only the knowledge the Moche had of their environment and its disturbances, but also the close connection they established between ecological changes and human sacrifice. Human and non-human beings were also often portrayed as hybrids. Such faded boundaries between life forms might reflect the relevance that the respective relationships within nature had in their cosmovision. Human sacrifices can be thus understood in the Moche context as acts performed for a 'common good'; as acts of taking care of the environment and, by extension, all lives within. Following this

¹ Bourget 2016.

reasoning, the Moche Blood Ceremony ceramic vessel makes me reconsider my own preconception of this sacrifice as a violent act *against* a human life, something that can even be judged by modern secular laws as murder. This reflection is, however, associated with a feeling of discomfort for me, as I touch on a sensitive topic I do not promote: the ending of human lives.

The word *sacrifice* can take up other meanings once it is deprived of its religious significance. One example for this are so-called *sacrificial zones*, hazardously contaminated areas adjacent to extractive industries where the health of people is constantly under risk.² This term dates back to the Cold War, when neighbourhoods in the USA populated by racial minorities and low-income communities had to suffer radioactive pollution from nearby mining and uranium processing for the development of nuclear weapons. Nowadays, these *sacrificial zones* exemplify the social inequality that characterizes the adverse effects of the current climate crisis.³ Human sacrifices can be understood in this context as part of the negative consequences on human lives that are imposed unfairly on entire communities and their environments. This strongly contrasts with the conscious decision made by the Moche to make sacrifices for the benefit of the community, the latter being understood as all interconnected life forms. In the here and now, acting for the benefit of all entities that compose the natural world without ending human lives could be a valuable lesson to learn from the Moche cosmovision and their rituals.

All in all, the Blood Ceremony vessel reminds me of the importance of acknowledging that there is no single, true worldview. It reminds me that one can learn from different cosmovisions without having to fully dissociate from a learned way of understanding reality. Such acts of self-reflection take on an even more important role if we remember that the Western worldview, one based on human dominance over nature, has historically been established around the world as the norm. This worldview has minimized other knowledges and has ultimately taken us to a point of no return in these current times of climate crisis.

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2 Lerner 2010.

3 Islam and Winkel 2017.

