

# KORWAR - Northwest New Guinea ritual art according to missionary sources

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in memory of  
Jac Hoogerbrugge (1923-2014)

[BLURB] Dutch Protestant missionaries have provided the earliest, most extensive and most detailed sources regarding the meanings, functions and cultural contexts of the spectacular ritual art of the Papuan peoples of the Geelvink Bay (Teluk Cenderawasih). Their local knowledge and command of local languages, often acquired during decades, combined with strict administrative routines, remained unmatched, even by such sophisticated early field collectors like colonial official and private scholar F.S.A. de Clercq. The missionaries have been responsible for the presence of thousands of ritual items, including at least a thousand *korwar* ancestor effigies, in present-day public and private collections. Most of these items passed through temporary missionary exhibitions in the Netherlands during the early 20th-century. While converting they collected - but they also destroyed, or had destroyed, at least as many items. *Korwar: Geelvink Bay ritual art according to missionary sources* chronicles these events in the Geelvink Bay missionary field between c1860 and c1940 and brings these sources to bear on c300 mostly unpublished ritual objects and their trajectories.



*"In groups young men went from house to house in order to collect the heathen attributes and figurines. These were piled up in the spacious courtyard behind the school-cum-church: a huge stack of various sorts of sorcery items. ... After sunset we all stood there in a wide circle around those items and while the school's pupils were singing flames blazed up and illuminated the surroundings. We saw how these wooden figures which once had been their venerated protectors were consumed by the intense fire and returned to ashes. A great deed of definitively breaking with the past! This was a sacrifice the value of which only God Himself could fathom."*

Missionary Albert de Neef commenting on a solemn burning of korwars and other items on Kurudu Island on Sunday 16 October 1930, after a service during which he baptized 648 villagers (in *Kennemer-Bode* 12 nr. 2, Febr. 1933; cf. de Neef, *Koeroedoe*, 20-21, 75 ff). Source of the etching, possibly after a photograph: de Neef, *Koeroedoe*, p. 77.