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Introduction

2010 marks the second edition of the Ottawa Journal of Religion of the Department of Classics and Religious Studies. The aim of the OJR is to showcase our graduate students' best works of the previous year, and this edition has achieved this in an exemplary fashion.

The Ottawa Journal of Religion 2010 includes 6 papers, all of which explore the topic of sacrifice and violence, though from dramatically distinct perspectives. Some papers exclusively engage with theory, others are far more ethnographically focused. All offer fresh and innovative explorations of "sacrifice", an age-old problematic in the field of Religious Studies.

As a departmental journal, the OJR is of necessity a collective effort, and many individuals deserve thanks for bringing it into fruition. In particular, however, the Committee of Studies and the Graduate Student Association merit special thanks, as does the Director of Graduate Studies, Theodore deBruyn, for his commitment to the journal's ongoing success. Greatest thanks and gratitude is owed to Julie Sylvestre, editor-in-chief of the OJR, without whose talents and stamina the OJR would never have been brought to completion.

Anne Valley

Introduction

L'année 2010 marque la 2ème édition de la Revue des sciences de la religion d'Ottawa publiée par département d'études anciennes et de science des religions. La revue a pour objectif d'exposer les meilleurs travaux de l'année écoulée présentés par nos étudiants inscrits au deuxième cycle. Cette édition représente un cas exemplaire d'excellence.

Ce numéro comprend 6 articles qui traitent le thème de sacrifice et de violence sous des angles foncièrement distincts. Certains articles se fondent essentiellement sur la théorie alors que d'autres étudient le volet ethnographique de la question. Ces contributions, dans leur ensemble, présentent une exploration nouvelle et innovatrice de la vieille notion problématique du sacrifice.

La revue des sciences de la religion est le fruit d'une collaboration de plusieurs personnes dont on salue les efforts. Nos remerciements vont en particulier au comité d'étude et à l'association des étudiants de deuxième cycle ainsi qu'au directeur du deuxième cycle, Theodore deBruyn, pour son soutien inconditionnel de la revue. Nous remercions également Julie Sylvestre, rédactrice en chef de la Revue pour son talent et son enthousiasme sans lesquels la Revue n'aurait pas pu voir le jour.

Anne Valley

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The Intimacy of the Sacred in Kali Worship and Sacrifice

Nika Kuchuk

Abstract: This paper examines sacrifice in the cult of the goddess Kali, as it is appropriated and practiced both in her native Indian context and within a unique Western setting. I examine the key theme of intimacy and George Bataille's notion of the sacred as both a traumatic and transformative rupture in ordinary reality. Kali's mythos illuminates and animates the practice of blood offering, such as goat sacrifice to Kali in Bengal, as well as the psycho-archetypal, mystic, and mythical aspects of Kali devotion, revealing a persistent continuity between the two forms. Thus, by entering into vastly different sacred landscapes, the experiential aspects of sacrifice interplay between violence and healing, creating an immanent relationship with the sacred other.

In Search of Intimacy and Transformation

This exploration of Kali worship is illuminated by broader questions concerning ritual sacrifice as a universal form of religious expression. It is also an attempt to theoretically reconcile the persistent recurrence of ritual sacrifice across cultures in its wildly varied ritual content and social function. Interestingly, the intimacy and visceral emotions associated with notions of sacrifice seem to be embedded in its language. For example, the English term “sacrifice” carries tragic and heroic connotations, such as giving up something precious, also known as abnegation, and yet, these associative themes may be altered, hidden, displaced, or altogether different in other cultural and linguistic settings. Sacrifice, then, is bound up in complex and ever-evolving processes with historical, cultural, and sacred realities; it is even bound within the personal history and experiences of the person utilizing the term, and holds enough power to evoke memories, sensations, and dispositions.

Sacrifice continues to occur across profoundly different religious, geographical, and temporal contexts where concrete human realities are expressed through sacrificial rites. Nancy Jay

addresses this issue by examining gender dynamics, patterns of social ordering, and the relationship between these structures and sacrifice. Despite Jay's contribution to the subject, her analysis remains insufficient as it disregards the reality of the sacred for the devotee, and instead regards the meaning of sacrifice as contained entirely in notions of social ordering. To claim a sacred reality as fact, rather than understanding it only as a means toward social ordering, expands the notions of human need, motive, and desire. Therefore, to avoid compartmentalizing the notion of sacrifice, I apply a phenomenological informed approach to examine this idea of experiential sacrifice, and to locate it meaningfully within specific religious and cultural worlds, particularly within the many dimensions of Kali worship.

It is perhaps even more pressing in this post-modern world to be sensitive to the tensions between the local and the global, a particular context and the universal, as well as the familiar and the unfamiliar, or "other", as religious symbols and realities migrate along with entire populations and bodies of information, taking root in new soil and along strange frontiers. Sacrifice in the cult of the goddess Kali is a fertile ground for exploring these tensions, and for understanding sacrifice in ways that are sympathetic to cultural and religious contexts, as well as to the comprehension of outsiders. Kali has gradually become an international goddess with western devotees and histories, and this phenomenon alone generates a great deal of relevancy and fascination toward understanding sacrifice.

The paradoxical nature of Kali is an essential aspect of her power. From the perspective of a westerner, Kali may seem especially contradictory, though at times even her worship in native India is controversial. As Rachel McDermott once said, Kali can be many things to many people. She is fierce and terrible, and yet she is a merciful loving mother. She is worshipped with flowers and sweets, as well as with meat and blood, sometimes offered in skulls. She is the main divinity in Sakta Tantra as the Female Principle. She is said to dwell in cremation grounds and favour the company of ghosts and jackals, and yet, there are altars dedicated to Kali in homes, on street corners, and in great temples. She is said to dance with a frenzy that threatens the worlds, yet she conquers death and confers the greatest boons. She is approached by ascetic tantrikas, ecstatic bhakti devotees, and will command trances, pain, and possession while granting courage, wisdom, and

peacefulness. She is an independent goddess – Time Herself – yet she emerges as an aspect of other goddesses in their moments of crisis, anger, and great passion. Kali will halt then calm only after having stepped on the prone body of Siva. In fact, the only absolute thing that can be said of Kali is she touches the lives of devotees in a profound and intimate manner – in her many guises she always retains the power of transformation. It is precisely these key themes of intimacy and transformation which function as my framework to contextualize and anchor the multifarious practices and imaginings of Kali.

In the context of this awesome and at times overwhelming goddess, I examine the nature of sacrifice as it constitutes a part of her cult. I also consider the way it is understood by the various voices of her worshippers, that is, the way it is being interpreted and appropriated within her native eastern context, as well as within the context of the west. When describing sacrifice, it is important to note that my primary focus is the literal ritual act of blood sacrifice, especially the offering of male goats as is customary in Bengal, as well as some other blood offerings in tribal village settings. In addition, I examine the psychological, mystic, and mythical senses of sacrifice experienced as spiritual self-sacrifice, or as the process of healing and working through trauma.¹ I will reveal the common currents of meaning between these two forms of sacrifice where the former heavily informs the latter, especially in certain western psychoanalytic appropriations of Kali, most notably the

¹ I do not include discussions of vegetarian or flower offerings as examples of sacrifice as there is some ambivalence regarding the equivalency between animal and vegetable offerings in Kali worship. Although, in both cases the “food” becomes *prasada* and is eventually consumed, goats have very specific symbolisms making them suitable victims for sacrifice, while vegetarian substitutes or flowers do not. Flowers, sweets, and other objects are lovingly offered for blessing, while the ceremony of killing goats is an elaborate affair, depending on the victim’s willingness and even joyful submission, which I later elaborate in further detail.

archetypal model belonging to the Jungian school.² I treat these psychoanalytic approaches as an alternative access point to a profound reality, which, even though may differentiate from the devotional path in form, does not differentiate in essence.

It is important to note that these literal and metaphorical notions of sacrifice compliment Georges Bataille's concepts of the intimate and the sacred, especially as non-discursive communication that is as traumatic as it is transformative³. The twin themes of intimacy and transformation found in the Kali cultus strongly resonate with Bataille's own writings on the subject, creating a unifying interpretive framework to examine sacrifice in both the eastern and western contexts. By juxtaposing two notions of sacrifice that are very different, and yet strikingly analogous, I seek to negotiate the emic/etic tensions and offer an alternative understanding of human-divine relationships.

Georges Bataille's Intimacy of the Sacred and Kali's Terrifying Dance

The writing of Georges Bataille offers a unique quality that resonates profoundly with Kali's characteristics and mythos. Similar to Kali, whose worship suspends the rules of purity, gender, and even cosmological order, Bataille's work resembles

² In my work, I do not discuss the Freudian model, nor do I examine Jeffery Kripal's analysis of Kali worship, as both focus on themes of mysticism, sexuality, and western appropriations of eastern symbols and narrative. Despite the breadth of these subjects, they lack a direct focus on sacrifice. Interestingly, it is Kripal's statement that psychoanalysis is "our Western Tantra. It transgresses in order to transcend", which, in my opinion, highlights the continuity between Kali worship and the psychoanalytic tradition as *ritual* directed toward goals of transformation (Kripal, Jeffrey J. 2000. "A garland of talking heads for the goddess: Some autobiographical and psychoanalytic reflections on the western Kali" in *Is the goddess a feminist?* New York: New York University Press, 250).

³ I would like to stress this is not a full and informed discussion of Bataille's work as such an endeavour is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, some of his ideas and concepts are used as inspiration – a "third" perspective of the subject matter that is neither devotional nor psychoanalytic for the purposes of examining commonalities in the underlying experience of sacrifice in both contexts.

her mad and frenzied dance that shatters worlds: “Encounters with horror, violent disgust, that miraculously transform into experiences of laughter, intoxication, ecstasy, constitute, for Bataille, inner experiences that overwhelm any sense of the distinction between interiority and exteriority”⁴. Kali, who dwells in cremation grounds and is intoxicated with the blood of slain demons, is an equally transformative force believed to “devour one’s karma” and grant liberation in this last and darkest age, the Kali Yuga⁵. Kali’s domain is not far from Bataille’s interest in extreme human realities, particularly if one corresponds the notion of ‘interiority’ to the ‘true self’ or ‘cosmic self’ in the Hindu worldview, and the notion of ‘exteriority’ to the all-pervasive illusory nature of the world or *maya*. David Kinsley writes: “[Kali] represents... something that has been pushed to its ultimate limits, something that has been apprehended as unspeakably terrifying, something totally and irrevocably ‘other’”⁶. It is from this outbreak of “otherness” deriving from a part of the self where intimate communication occurs.

Throughout his work Bataille remarks a great deal on intimacy, though some of his more thought-provoking comments on the subject connect to laughter, which he describes as a rupture in ordinary reality – a knowledge – a form of communication “through death, with our beyond (essentially in sacrifice) – not with nothingness, still less with a supernatural being, but with an indefinite reality... the impossible, that is: what can’t be grasped... what we can’t reach without dissolving ourselves”⁷. This describes a conversation or communication which transcends the self. In fact, this dissolution of the self is also equated with the Indian concept of *moksha*. Bataille is somewhat ambivalent to the idea of communicating with a supernatural being. In his view, if we believe in a transcendent

⁴ Botting, Fred and Scott Wilson, ed. 1998. *The Bataille Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2.

⁵ It is important to note Kālī the goddess should not be confused with Kali the demon-personification of this last age. This confusion happens often enough, especially in the west, where “Kali” is often written without diacritics.

⁶ Kinsley, David. 1975. Freedom from death in the worship of Kālī. *Numen* 22 (3) (12): 183-207,184.

⁷ *Bataille Reader*, 59.

reality we can choose to define it as the sacred, otherwise, it can remain undefined “in ordinary laughter, infinite laughter, or ecstasy in which the divine form melts like sugar in water”⁸. The rupture of laughter relates to communication and knowledge, and sacrifice is but one type of rupture. In his writings on sacrifice Bataille reasserts: “intimacy cannot be expressed discursively”⁹. Therefore, intimacy is a communication experienced outside of language, even if language is our only tool to describe or discuss it. Although states of possession within the worship of Kali are beyond the scope of this paper, they remain extremely vivid representations (dreams or visions) of Kali where the experiences of heat, fever, and even illness are forms of intimacy¹⁰.

Sacrifice, for Bataille, is associated with the power of death (a physical, tangible rupture); however, this death only destroys the “thing-ness” of the victim. “Sacrifice destroys an object’s real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility”¹¹. Thus, the act of sacrifice will transform the victim as the victim is placed outside the system of ordinary things. This is especially true with regard to Suchitra Samanta’s notion of the “self-animal”, which I will address within the following section on goat sacrifice in Bengal. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the self-animal who is sacrificed, devoured, and digested by the goddess elevates both the self and the sacrificial animal to a better order of rebirth, thus perfecting one’s cosmic self. Sacrifice restores a lost intimacy with one’s real (cosmic) self, or with the divine, and sometimes with both, as the two can be analogous. Restoration of intimacy is also a restoration of immanence: “immanence between man and the

⁸ *Ibid*, 59

⁹ *Ibid*, 213

¹⁰ Kali possession and the significance of heat and fever in these instances merit an entirely separate discussion. I only mention them in passing, though some of the more interesting accounts of fevers and visions of Kali can be found in Sarah Caldwell’s, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, where Caldwell describes her first-hand experience of it, as well as Roxanne Gupta’s semi-biographical chapter on “Kali Mayi” in *Encountering Kali*.

¹¹ *Bataille Reader*, 210

world, between the subject and object.”¹² This calls to mind the Tantric teachings on Kali, the hero’s conquest and liberation, as well as the devotional bhakti tradition and the ecstatic union with Kali as the all-loving Mother. Incidentally, the world of things, or objects, is only meaningful in the frame of durational time; therefore, death seems unreal in the real world of things. Yet, death is the “wonder-struck cry of life” paradoxically affirming individual existence and revealing “the invisible brilliance of life that is *not* a thing”¹³ (emphasis original). It is important to note the ecstatic quality of this rupture, that is, the transformation of anguish and trembling with holy wonder and joy, aptly named by Bataille as “the Festival”, is parallel to the terrifying yet transformative aspects of Kali. According to Bataille, the divine world is dangerous and contagious and one can hardly resist imagining Kali’s frenetic dance of destruction, even if she is eventually calmed by the prone body of Siva at her feet: “the festival is tolerated to the extent that it reserves the necessities of the profane world”¹⁴. In this dialectic, laughter is the other side of terror, functioning as a rupture in the same manner as sacrifice. The two experiences appear paradoxical, however, both share the reality of a “moment of violent contact, when life slips from one person to another”¹⁵ or from devotee to goddess, and even from goddess to devotee.

Sacrifice in Bengal: Goats and Blood for Ma Kali

Tantric principles, Puranic writings (including Devi-Mahatmya), bhakti devotion, and folk traditions all inform Bengali Kali worship; however, goat sacrifice is also a daily habitual practice within Kali’s sacred landscape. In writing about the specificities of sacrifice within this context, Suchitra Samanta calls Kali a “ubiquitous presence” in contemporary Bengali life and religious landscapes. Most notably, the common perception of Kali as Mother, and the cultivation of such a relationship with her, is due

¹² *Ibid*, 210

¹³ *Ibid*, 212

¹⁴ *Bataille Reader*, 215

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 61

to the immense influence of the life and works of two Bengali saints and Kali devotees, Ramaprasada and Ramakrsna. This tradition emphasizes the loving and compassionate aspects of Kali, with the devotee in the role of her adoring and trusting child. At the same time, the iconic four-armed avatar Daksina (or south-facing Kali) and the ten-armed Mahakali (or Great Kali) both portray Kali as a wild, frenzied, and terrifying presence. In popular iconography Kali is dark, naked, adorned with freshly cut heads and arms, covered in blood, facing south in the direction of Death. In facing this direction, Kali asserts her mastery over death. She is also stepping on the prone body of Siva (sometimes representing the universe) with her right foot; it is believed Siva has thrown himself at her feet to stop her mad and destructive dance. In her four arms she holds a bloodied sword and a freshly decapitated head, the other two arms gesture a sign of no fear and of one who confers boons. Kali's devotees believe she grants everything from prayers and wishes, to reincarnation in heaven and total liberation.

With this visual image in mind, Samanta writes: "Her name appears on the name-board of Calcutta restaurants, grocery stores, and pharmacies... [her image] on the dashboards of almost every taxicab and bus in the city. Worshipped both at domestic altars as well as at the numerous Kali temples... [she] occupies a powerful emotional place in the Bengali heart as the ideal and protective Mother"¹⁶. This emphasis of her role as mother reveals a great intimacy and different authority structure in the divine-human relationship. It also produces a certain amount of ambivalence towards blood sacrifice as there is "reluctance to offer a loving Mother-goddess the blood of one of her own creations"¹⁷.

Sacrificial Kali worship is termed bali, or gift, including vegetable and animal offerings "textually prescribed and mandatory", as well as vow-related offerings, occurring when Kali grants the sacrificer a request, such as healing, employment, or resolving a conflict. These offerings are mostly offered at temples because Brahman priests must perform chanting and purification rites; however, they are also offered domestically on

¹⁶ Samanta, Suchitra. 1994. "The 'self-animal' and divine digestion: Goat sacrifice to the goddess Kali in Bengal." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (3) (Aug.): 779-803, 780

¹⁷ Samanta 1994, 783

Kalipuja day. Meat from daily temple sacrifice is cooked and presented to the goddess as part of her regular food offering; later, it is sold as prasad (food infused with divine grace), while meat from a privately sponsored sacrifice is returned to the sacrificer to be taken home as the “greatest form of prasad”.

Samanta’s description of certain social and cultural elements of bali and the intimate experiences associated with it is particularly compelling. For example, Samanta writes that in times of crisis many of her informants found it efficient to secretly offer vow-related bali. One informant mentioned less common forms of bali, such as an enemy-offering, which is a kind of dough figure immolated with a sword on Kalipuja. The informant also described a self-offering, expressed as a blood offering from one’s own chest, as well as offering goat heads to jackals since jackals are associated with Kali. In every one of these cases, sacrifice marks a critical and agonizing point in the life of the sacrificer, while remaining a very important point of transformation.

Within the emerging scheme, blood is a substance that acts as a conduit, and drinking the blood of the immolated goat is said to grant immortality. At the Kalighat Temple, the blood of the immolated animal is used for auspicious anointing and is specially treated and bottled for the sacrificer to take home. This ritual is outside the normal order of things as both blood and meat are extremely polluting in the Hindu context. Bataille would argue this particular event is the stage of the “Festival”. Thus, the pain and anguish of the slain animal, as well as the emotions deriving from the personal crisis precipitating the sacrifice, are the rupture by which the sacrificer (as well as the victim) communicates with the goddess.

In her work, Samanta proposes a unique view of sacrifice where the meaning and central logic of sacrifice are based in an understanding of the self as deeply rooted in the Hindu worldview. According to Samanta, central to understanding bali is knowing the difference between the Judeo-Christian understanding of the relationship between self and divinity and the Hindu conception of Sakti as the divine personification of the creative power sakti present in every living being: “Where in the Western tradition God and man are perceived as two separate entities, the distinction between sacrificer and Sakti are...

ambiguous”¹⁸. In presenting an alimentary theme that is particularly meaningful and relevant in the Hindu context, Samanta proposes a “homology between the ‘self’ (jiva) of the sacrificer and the sacrificial animal (pasu), and the ‘consumption’ of the ‘self-animal’ by the goddess over many lifetimes until it achieves unity and liberation (moksa)”¹⁹. Thus, the ritual act of sacrifice is the very act of transformation of the self-animal. The personal energy contained within each individual, that is, his or her sakti (akin to life-force), is not entirely separate from the divine as Sakti (in this case figured by Kali the Mother, the feminine principle, or the ultimate reality), making this ultimate reality at once a reality of the sacred and a reality of the self. Samanta writes about the characteristics of the sacrificer:

“animal-like in his lack of perception [and] desires enlightenment as realization and divine beneficence... Bali enacts the transformation of the sacrificer from raw flesh and blood to that of burnt offering... The “knowledgeable” goddess is invoked in the rite to devour the flesh and “drink” the blood of the deluded and bound self-animal, and thus assist in its enlightenment”²⁰.

This view is supported by both traditional and mythic elements where Kali often emerges as a personification of the anger and fury of another goddess, such as Durga, Parvati, or Sita, in the course of a divine battle between gods and demons. These demons are sometimes compared to “animals” that are “sacrificed” on the battlefield, and here too, there is the persistence of a crisis theme as a point of transformation, both for the goddesses that give rise to Kali, and for the situation at large. Kali becomes a “devourer of demons”, representing lust, ambition, calamity, and ignorance. Interestingly, goats represent these very same qualities, especially of uncontrolled sexuality; therefore, they are an ideal offering for Kali (symbolically

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 782

¹⁹ Samanta 1994, 782

²⁰ Samanta 1994, 790

congruent with demons)²¹ as they represent the same qualities the sacrificer wishes to expel from the self.

Recalling Bataille, we can argue that the portion of the victim identified with the self is imbued with “thingness”, thus, uncontrolled sexuality, lust, or excessive ambition is imagined as the nature of the self. Perhaps they are not self-referential qualities, but those that seek out the world and the “order of things”. Bataille’s own understanding of sacrifice as a separation restoring wholeness and dissolving the individual parallels to Samanta’s statement that “severing the animal enacts the complementarity between self and divinity, part and whole – where the whole is reaffirmed by its separation into parts”²². According to Samanta, the most important part of sacrifice is the intent: a clear and stated purpose for the desire to surrender or give up demonic parts of oneself on the way to realizing one’s divine potential. Parallel to her claim that the Hindu sense of self is informed by the worldview of multiple rebirths and the goal of liberation, a “motif of alimentation” dictates the divine condition as being “totally cooked” or “digested”, a function performed by Kali. Within this context, Kali is understood as Time herself (“Kali” as the feminine form of *kala*, or time); thus, over time, with persistence and intention, an individual can fully realize their cosmic self and become liberated.

This view, however, seems insufficient, particularly when one considers the unique devotional relationship that exists between Kali and her devotees, as well as the testimonies mentioned earlier from Samanta’s own informants. It would seem the profound experience of sacrifice is not limited to intent alone. The act itself is also a moment imbued with special meaning. For example, many of Samanta’s informants consider vegetarian substitutions for animal sacrifice less efficacious. The complex set of rituals observed during sacrifice, while certainly stressing intent, also fuse the symbolic with the corporeal and incorporate socially normative practices, such as the

²¹ It would be interesting to explore this cross-cultural association of goats with lust and other “demonic” qualities, including such European representations as satyrs, which are known for sexual prowess, as well as Pan, god of field and fertility, also associated with sexual promiscuity or fecundity. Christian imaginings of the Devil, especially as medieval distortions of Greek deities, also picture Pan as goat-horned and goat-footed.

²² Samanta 1994, 798.

requirements of Brahman priests and other dominant patriarchal characteristics of sacrifice. Some elements of sacrifice and ritual evoke deeply felt culturally specific topographies that associate the body with a special orientation and sacred reality. For example, the sacrifice is performed while facing north, an auspicious direction as it faces the goddess (who faces south); the sacrificer stands in the south (the quarter associated with death), making the sacrifice both a death and transformation of death (congruent to Bataille's description of sacrifice).

Earlier I mentioned that a crisis theme is vital for maintaining the transformative qualities of a sacrifice. The sacrifice sponsored by an individual is usually occasioned by a great crisis, like the forbidden or polluting substances used in Kali worship and sacrifice, which break the surface of the order of things. David Kinsley writes of the Tantric path involving Kali worship: "by partaking of the forbidden, by indulging himself in it ritually, he [the Tantric hero] triumphs over it" and "the forbidden loses its power to pollute, to degrade, to bind"²³. This demonstrates that the communication of the reality of things (e.g.: the arbitrariness of their forbidden nature) is a form of intimate communication occurring in the rupture or sacrifice. Therefore, it is not acting for the sake of acting (a spectacle); rather, it is living and experiencing a moment of intimacy. Understanding sacrifice in this manner fulfils Samanta's eloquent description of the transformation of the self-animal, and allows one to consider sacrifice from a phenomenological-comparativist perspective.

Sacrifice As Inner Experience: Kali the Archetype

Western appropriations of Kali and sacrifice are unique because they are understood as inner experience. Although sacrifice within this context is comprehended as metaphorical, the recurrence of certain themes, such as trauma, crisis, intimate communication, and transformation make sacrifice as inner experience comparable to sacrifice as ritual killing. It is important to note that I perceive continuity between religious life and psychoanalysis in terms of the experiential and ritual dimensions. For example, in so far as one lives a conscious life

²³ Kinsley 1975, 199.

and undergoes analysis consciously, any sacrifice performed or experienced as part of this process becomes a distinct and ritualized practice.

The Jungian analyst, Ashok Bedi, imagines Kali as an archetype activated in times of crisis “[amputating] the darkness of our soul and [making] room for the light... [destroying] the darkness of personality and [making] room for new consciousness to emerge”. Rather than mediate a relationship between self and others, she mediates “our relationship with the transpersonal Self”²⁴. This is a similar description of the Kali in Bengali worship that “devours our demons and liberates our cosmic self”. Bedi is also convinced Kali appears as a “paradox within our psyche”, transforming through destruction and embodying the “union of opposites in our personality”²⁵. Her Tantric qualities of granting liberation from opposites (the dialectical flux of materiality) are emphasized and understood as the Shadow archetype in Jungian analysis. Bedi fuses the Indian framework situating Kali within a sacred universe to a more analytical framework, which includes alchemical symbolism for the stages of perfecting the soul (adopted by Jung for analysis). Interestingly, this results in a surprisingly coherent semi-mysticism:

“Kali’s three eyes represent the past, present, and future. Her white teeth symbolize the albedo (whiteness), or purity of the soul, her red tongue the rubedo (redness), or passion for life... she holds a severed head, symbolizing the sacrifice of our shadow... she is changeless, limitless, primordial power acting in the great drama, awakening the Shiva (unconscious masculine principle) beneath her feet”²⁶.

Thus, the process of analysis appears to have internalized almost verbatim the function of the Bengali sacrificial act. Samanta’s insistence of the fluidity between divine and human power is also satisfied as the sacred is internalized. It is important to note

²⁴ Bedi, Ashok. 2003. “Kali – The Dark Goddess.” In *The Moonlit Path: Reflections on the Dark Feminine*. Berwick: Nicolas-Hays, 157.

²⁵ Bedi 2003, 158

²⁶ *Ibid*, 160

that Bedi promotes Kali as a guide for working through traumatic experiences. In the moment of a crisis event, an individual is “possessed” by the Kali archetype and must confront the “dark side” and “relinquish association” with the darkness in order to resume the “responsibility of consciousness”. This is another example of Kali splitting off into two parts: a so-called demonic Kali and a liberating boon granting Kali. This example bears a striking resemblance to the “good Mother, bad Mother” of Ramaprasada’s devotional Kali poetry.

As expressed within Bedi’s case studies²⁷, themes of beheading strongly connected to Kali’s classic iconography are important representations of her archetype and of drawing from her archetype: “[w]hen the patriarchal order becomes rigid, dehumanizing, inauthentic... the great Kali archetype decapitates and dissolves the existing dysfunction”²⁸. Perhaps, then, it is not a coincidence Kali’s garland is dressed with freshly chopped heads, and one of her left hands is made of male heads²⁹. More broadly, she “decapitated the existing thinking function, making room for new logic”³⁰. This, in a sense, is a transformation that can be quite profound.

The most evocative discussion involving Kali and sacrifice is contextualized in terms of alchemical transformation. Kali, ever the paradoxical figure, is associated with the first and last stages of alchemy – the lowest and highest stages of transmutation. In terms of personality development, the alchemical process is understood as the process of arriving at the self’s highest potential, not unlike the goal of realizing the cosmic or divine self. The first stage, *negrado*, represents the crisis stage where a substance is broken down into its original

²⁷ Although “devouring” and “beheading” are operative in the Kali mythos and iconography, the former is more relevant as a key interpretive concept in the Indian context, and the latter is prevalent in western imaginings of Kali, though this is a topic reserved for another discussion.

²⁸ Bedi 2003, 167

²⁹ The gender issue is touched upon briefly in this paper with regard to Jeffrey Kripal’s Freudian analytic perspective. Unfortunately, at this time I cannot develop this theme in more depth even if it is a very important aspect of the entire underlying premise of Kali worship and its social realities.

³⁰ Bedi 2003, 168

undifferentiated form so that it might be transformed. Characterized by the colour black, it is the stage of rotting (*putreficatio*) and death (*mortificatio*). The “prima materia is without definite boundaries, limits, or form... It may evoke the terror of dissolution of our consciousness or the awe of experience of unconscious eternity. The Kali encounter is both”³¹. This resonates with Bataille’s commentary on the transformative character of terror and anguish, and the violence of the rupture. Within this context, Kali once again represents a communication beyond language. The second (final) stage, marked by the colour red (*rubedo*) and emblematic of blood, passion, and sacrifice, “leads to re-animation of life”³², which is only possible with the successful resolution of the tensions present in the *negrado* stage. Sacrifice is essential in this reanimation. Bedi compares it to the realization of one’s “Christ potential”, though within the context of Kali it is more in conjunction with Bataille’s description of the individual as a whole not experiencing death. Instead, it is the victimized part that dies and represents the “thingness”, or objective reality, preventing the individual from becoming a subject.

It is no surprise that dreams are a main foundation of psychoanalysis. However, within the Indian context of Kali dreams are also pivotal, as encounters with Kali often occur in dreams. In Bedi’s account, the themes of terror, rage, chaos, beheading, and eventual victory coalesce with the description of a transformative and pivotal dream experienced by a psychoanalysis patient named Rose. Rose is first assaulted in her dream. Rose then sees herself holding the man’s head in her hands, which she brandishes as a victory sign. She proceeds to climb a bell tower and lets out a shrill scream. From Rose’s description, Bedi presumes the bell tower is actually a church (which Bedi interprets as Kali incarnate because of the association of Mother Kali and Mother Church), and the scream is Kali’s battle cry. Thus, in her dream, Rose achieves the sacrificer’s goal of liberating oneself from the confines of the object-self and realizing one’s divine potential. In addition, as a non-discursive experience, dreams can be a kind of intimate communication, lived through images, emotions, and moments

³¹ Bedi 2003, 170

³² *Ibid*, 171

of violence. Sacrifice, according to Bedi, is “a symbolic relinquishment of a certain aspect of one’s psychic life”³³. Using Samanta’s expression, both Bedi’s and Bataille’s understandings of sacrifice and transformation are homologous to the function of sacrifice in Kali’s cultus.

Final Thoughts

The common thread weaving through both types of sacrifice explored in connection with the worship of the goddess Kali is one of extreme situations. Kinsley may call her an “extreme goddess”, but only because Kali is a necessity and must be called upon in moments of crisis, trauma, and transformation. These moments, according to Bataille, are moments of extreme emotion – experiences of anguish, terror, or laughter. They are key transformative experiences making it possible to communicate with a greater reality. These are moments of intimacy, violent in their rupture of the “real order of things”. For Bataille, the unreality of the divine (within the order of things or objects) is the very proof of its ultimate existential reality; essentially, an inversion of order occurs similar to Kali’s inversion of the order of purity, karma, and peaceful existence. Paradoxically, such an inversion helps to maintain this very order while offering an escape from it, thus negotiating the dialectic of object-subject within a sacred landscape.

Sacrifice in Kali worship illustrates this intimate experiential dimension. Although Samanta offers a view of the bali as a unique reflection of a Hindu worldview and final goal of liberation, elements of the act of sacrifice, namely the experiential, bodily, and intimate elements (among them the most dramatic being an actual killing of a victim), can be similarly observed within certain western structures. This is illustrated within a Jungian text about Kali; though, it is possible other archetypes dealing with traumatic experiences follow a similar pattern.

Themes of achieving greater consciousness through the sacrifice of the self-animal, the Tantric conquest of the

³³ Bedi 2003, 178

‘forbidden’, as well as psychoanalysis as a form of healing are often encountered in the many contexts of Kali. Bataille argues this increased consciousness is a communication “through death, with our beyond... with an indefinite reality”; it is an immanence, “immanence between man and the world, between the subject and object”, and can be understood both as the experience of ecstatic union with the divine and self-realization as divine (in Hindu tradition these are often glossed). The fluidity of an individual’s personal power, or life force (sakti), and the goddess as the incarnation of this power (Sakti), also supports the possibility of such transformative intimacy.

At the same time, the practice of Kali worship varies greatly in different contexts. Throughout this essay, I was concerned with delivering an experiential and phenomenological understanding of sacrifice that allows for an emic culture-specific perspective, however, it is worth noting sacrifice is not the only central element in Kali worship. Throughout my research, a recurring question arose: why do different real-life expressions of sacrifice exist? How are practices so distinct, and yet strikingly similar, when observed between eastern and western traditions, and within Kali’s native context where animal sacrifice is one of a myriad of devotions. Perhaps the difference is a conglomeration of normative cultural expressions. Also, a greater abstraction of the self as an active agent, and a greater reliance on what Samanta would call the “personality” of the divine (be it God, Goddess, or goddess) leads to a greater internalization of the elements of sacrifice. This is not to say one is somehow more advanced than the other; they simply operate in somewhat different sacred landscapes, influenced by a combination of historical, social, and environmental factors. The tribal black magician, for example, lives in an almost entirely immanent universe where his or her actions reflect immediately on the physical environment. Perhaps in a more extreme interpretation, the coexistence of life and death are in close proximity to the figure of Kali as a real and everyday part of one’s reality. The mystic devotee seeking a child-like union with the Mother inhabits a different space, and his or her perception of the Kali principles may be more internalized. He or she may even experience reticence at offering live animals (to a loving, protective Mother), and may practice a vegetarian puja in honour of Ma Kali, instead. These distinctions are of extreme importance to those who practice them (as well as to scholars of

religion), and form a complex and multidimensional sacred landscape. Moreover, any one individual may incorporate more than one approach to the sacred, fluidly moving between elements that are more immanent and mystical.

Finally, my goal was to examine the experiential elements of sacrifice. It is possible that my conclusions only apply to sacrifice in the context of Kali worship where it is associated with a moment of rupture and transformation in so far as Kali herself is a transforming goddess. Yet the intimacy involved in violence and in laughter, both responses to conditions of objectivity and subjectivity, seem to acknowledge a basic human element. Moments of crisis are moments of transformation, even if the particular content of such a synthesis may differ dramatically. Crisis requires equally disturbing, unexpected, and transgressive modes of coping and interpretation, and while Kali is a deity whose very ethos is transgressive, sacrifice as an act or a metaphor is not any less so. In reflecting upon Bataille's words, the notion of sacrifice combines voluntary (ritual, magic, analysis) elements and involuntary (dreams, mysticism, possession) elements, and it appears that it may function as a coping mechanism at both the individual and social level. Similarly, Kali's gory garments of decapitated heads and amputated arms, followed by her mad and destructive dance, are reminders of the infinite instances of sacrifice – sacrifices made of violent and anguished moments – moments transformed into ecstatic experiences of the sacred where a crisis can break the surface of the world of things into the realm of the divine.

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War is Peace: Analyzing Sigmund Freud's and René Girard's Theories of Violence and Sacrifice

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Abstract: This essay will compare and contrast the theories of Sigmund Freud and René Girard, particularly those aspects dealing with religion, culture, and violence, to decipher the role both Freud and Girard allocate to religion in controlling societal violence. Although both theorists offer socio-cultural narratives, their conceptions differ considerably, offering antipodal viewpoints on the topic of religion and sacrifice.

Introduction

History provides powerful examples of the human tendency toward violence, both on the level of society and the individual. Sigmund Freud and René Girard present comparable theories to comprehend this endemic nature of violence that has occurred throughout history. As Freud's successor, Girard is heavily influenced by Freud's past works, having participated in a continuous dialogue with Freudian theory to distinguish his own work from that of Freud. Freud and Girard, then, hold distinct theories concerning violence in the early beginnings of society and culture, yet both share a common thread in their efforts to *understand* the origins of society, culture, and religion.

According to Freud and Girard, the origins of culture and religion are found in sacrifice; therefore, deciphering the origin of culture and religion can shed light on the nature and origin of sacrifice. Sacrifice is about giving and receiving. In its earliest forms, this 'give and take' was commonly expressed through a sacrificial killing. It created a space where beliefs and tensions could be expressed through a controlled form of violence. Freud and Girard both conceived of an event at the foundation of the socio-cultural formation that preceded sacrifice. This event, known as the collective murder, occurred in a time and space where violence was without the confines of society, and it also became the derivative from which religion and culture would evolve.

Distinguishing himself from the vast majority of academics in the latter half of the 20th century, Girard concedes "...a more positive view of *Totem and Taboo* than most people do" (Girard 1987, 121). "I believe in this insight [collective murder], but I disagree with Freud on how to interpret it" (*ibid*). Although Girard is indebted to Freud's insights, he strives to supersede them. All Freudian theory is based in psychoanalysis – evolutionary principles of the mind, culture, and religion. Girard avoids Freud's psychoanalysis, though he chooses to participate in an "exegetical debate" with Freud's works to formulate his own theory (Mack 1987, 15). Freud attempted to understand the foundations for religion through incestuous instinctual desires, whereas Girard replaces the Oedipal complex with mimetic desire and rivalry (*ibid*). Thus, even though Girard and Freud consider sacrifice and violence as emerging from non-conscious processes, the reasoning behind their postulations differ.

This essay will explore the differences between Freud's and Girard's theories to further understand their ideas surrounding culture, religion, and violence. Freud was guided by scientific principles to decipher the evolutionary origins of religion, calling for science to replace religion. Girard, on the other hand, turns to Christianity in his search for origins, asserting the importance of Christian beliefs within modern society. At the foundation of their theories is a claim supported by an abundance of contemporary and historical evidence: contrived socio-cultural structures are easily destroyed through violence. Although their warnings against violence are analogous, their solutions are antagonistic. Thus, while it is possible to compare their theories, they lack the capacity to be fully reconciled.

Surrogate Victim or Scapegoat Mechanism?

Girard suggests scapegoat sacrifice is the universal foundation of socio-cultural formation, and the basis of mythology, ritual, and religion (1987, 106). Mimetic rivalry intensifies idiosyncrasies within communities whereas the surrogate victim (the scapegoat) unites members by displacing hostilities onto a single victim (Girard 1987, 126 & McBride 2003, 307). He does not consider the identity of the victim, rather, it is only important that the "victim genuinely passes as guilty" (1978, 169). Thus, the

essence of the scapegoat is to incorporate and channel disparity in order to dismantle difference (McBride 2003, 308). Girard argues violence against “a single individual is substituted for the universal onslaught of reciprocal violence” (1978, 169).¹ The surrogate victim channels mimetic rivalry onto an appropriated victim, that is, the scapegoat, who becomes a sacrificeable victim preventing “the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect” (Girard 1977, 4).

Similar to the persecution of criminals, Girard theories that endorsed ritual violence is justified by upholding the status quo of society (1987, 79). The underlying principles for both forms of violence – from the death penalty and persecution to animal sacrifice and blood letting – is to control violence. Girard understands this process as “purifying” violence, a method to “trick” violence onto objects lacking the capacity for reprisal (1977, 16). Underlying Girard’s ideas is the notion that violence is infectious and must be managed with more violence – the disease is the cure (*ibid*). A fundamental principle of Girard’s mimetic desire theory is that humans are capable of sharing an enemy, but incapable of sharing an object of desire. Girard’s reasoning is that, unlike an object of desire, an enemy can be shared through its collective destruction (1987, 128), thus removing the threat of uncontrolled or mass violence.

According to Girard, displacement of violence onto a scapegoat is not a conscious choice, nor is it a known process (1987, 74). However, he is careful not to conflate this process with Freud’s notion of unconscious processes, even though Girard’s description of the scapegoat process seems synonymous with unconscious processes (i.e. unobservable to conscious awareness). Therefore, to distinguish his theory from Freud, Girard chooses to label the process ‘nonconscious’ instead of ‘unconscious’ processes (1987, 78). Still, Girard asserts that individuals involved are unaware and unable to realize the scapegoat mechanism, thus, in a sense, delusion is what makes the mechanism, or process, so effective (1987, 74 & 78).

¹ Girard: “...any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat. Its members instinctively seek an immediate and violent cure for the onslaught of unbearable violence and strive desperately to convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone individual who can easily be disposed of” (1977, 80).

Girard regards conflict as an inherent part of human social interaction and a by-product of mimetic desire. Thus, sacrificing a scapegoat is an essential process within the origins of community as it “interrupts” cyclical conflict and maintains society as a whole (1987, 121). Once the scapegoat is chosen and the sacrifice is performed, the scapegoat comes to represent the essence of the sacred in its transformation from victim to idol of reverence. “The sacred is the sum of human assumptions resulting from collective transferences focused on a reconciliatory victim at the conclusion of a mimetic crisis” (Girard as quoted in McBride 2003, 309). McBride interprets Girard’s notion of the sacred “[as] the sign of the transcendence of individuation and the unanimity of the community, the holy is grounded in the violent death of the victim that reconciles the community’s members, one with another” (2003, 309). Furthermore, collective violence against the scapegoat dismantles “all memory of the past” (nonconscious). Due to this collective amnesia, a “sacrificial crisis” is never accurately described in myth and ritual: “Men cannot confront the naked truth of their own violence without the risk of abandoning themselves to it entirely” (Girard 1977, 82 & 83). Thus, the scapegoat prevents reciprocal violence and embodies an expulsion of violent urges from the conscious mind.

Similar to Girard’s scapegoat theory, Freud proposed that sacrifice involves a surrogate victim acting as a channel to direct violent urges, thus, violent energy is released onto a chosen victim to prevent chaos. Influenced by Robertson Smith², Freud interpreted sacrificial ritual as easing social taboos and social norms, allowing individuals to engage in acts not normally permitted. Conversely, Girard considers sacrifice a necessary aspect of the mimetic desire process. Despite these differences,

² The communal sacrifice of the clan animal, as described by Robertson Smith (1899), established bonds within the clan. Similar to Durkheim’s (1912) later theory, Smith theorized the origins of communal emanate from sacrifice. Building on the belief that sacrifice was an act of killing by the entire community, typically forbidden under normal circumstances, Smith asserted that the clan members have a “conscious realization” they are engaged in a prohibited act, which can only be justified through the entire communities involvement (quoted in Freud 1913, 180). Thus, the communal killing and consumption of the sacrifice – “the unchaining of every impulse and the permission of every gratification” – is proceeded by mourning (Freud 1913, 181). Freud added that sacrifice is full of emotional ambivalence.

Girard and Freud claim sacrificial rituals are performative remembrances of the initial act of murder. For Freud, sacrificial rituals were performed to remember the primordial father; the sacrificed victim – whether animal or human – always acts as surrogate for the father. Girard, on the other hand, considers the scapegoat the focal point of the sacrifice. In its transformation from victim to sacred, the scapegoat becomes the object of remembrance; it is transformed into an object of respect, desire, fear, hostility, and finally, reverence. Furthermore, Girard rejects Freud’s theory of sacrifice and ritual in stating that the process described by Freud is “purely personal”, and not a collective process (1977, 101). However, Girard misconstrues Freud’s thesis. Freud actually connected both the individual *and* the collective to ritual processes. According to Freud’s notion of object relations, throughout individual development every male will develop the Oedipal complex when negotiating their relationship with their caregivers (i.e.: mother and father). Freud considered the collective aspect of ritual as relating to evolutionary antiquity and the origins of socio-cultural formation: overthrowing the despotic father of the primal horde and renouncing instinctual urges. Despite Girard’s assumptions, then, Freud saw ritual as mirroring the negotiation of desires on both the individual and the collective level.

With respect to the origins of religion, Freud said that “god is in every case modelled after the father” (1913, 190). His hypothesis was that in all likelihood totemism became the first substitute for the father, and all successive religions came to evolve from an ambivalent relationship with the father. Totems established incest taboos and portrayed ambivalent attitudes toward the father to reconcile the guilt from patricide. It also allowed for the sublimation of murderous desires through totemic sacrifice. Freud discerned totemism and exogamy to be inherently connected. He interpreted religion as evolving from totemism and considered totemism the projection and expression of imposed moral restrictions deriving from incest urges (Oedipus complex) and its associated guilt. Originating from totemism, religion became an attempt to reconcile emotional ambivalence: ritual represents a remembrance and repentance of overthrowing the father. The history of religion, then, is nothing more than a replication of its own origins (Freud in Ricoeur 1970, 243).

Interestingly, Girard's interpretation of Freud's theory as a process of "individualization" is actually the opposite of what Freud proposed. According to Freud, socio-cultural origins are a process of *de-individualization*, an attempt to control narcissism: "All ties upon which a group depends are of the character of instincts that are inhibited in their aims" (Freud 1921, 140). He believed man experienced a constant desire to commit the act (overthrow of the father) – man is anarchic – and social institutions repress and dissuade males from engaging in patricide; thus, Freud interpreted religion as a commemoration of patricide. Girard accuses Freud of failing to understand the process of the surrogate victim as the *modus operandi* (1977, 197). "If Freud's explanation of sacrifice must be adjusted in favour of the surrogate victim, then we must assume that the same will apply to his account of incest prohibitions" (Girard 1977, 215). According to Girard, this collective murder is forgotten, though the creation of myths provides insight into the murder. Thus, religious and cultural practices are manifestations of the collective murder: "the sacrificial rite as a commemoration of a real event" (1977, 92 & 103). Although Girard is in accordance with Freud's ethnology, he rejects Freud's interpretation: "A fresh and constructive reading of the work should lead us to reject almost all the elements that psychoanalysts recognize as valid and to acknowledge the validity of those very elements that psychoanalysts reject" (Girard 1977, 216).

Sacrifice as a Social Contract

Freud's theory of patricide was created out of his own conviction that savages lacked the capacity for dissociation, or that they lacked the ability to substitute thought with action because they were unable to grasp the notion of the self-conscious (1913, 207). In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud concluded: "...though without vouching for the absolute certainty of the decision, that 'In the beginning was the deed'" (1913, 207). For Freud, the "deed", whether through patricide or dismounting the tyrannical father, involved a historical evolutionary shift in socio-cultural formation, including the origin of religion.

According to Freud, whether this discussion of patricide is literal or figurative, its importance lies in it giving birth to the

fraternal clan. Although Freud questioned whether the murder is “historically true” or “explanatory fiction”, he nevertheless considered it a psychological reality: “the causal chain leading from murder to civilized religion and morality is unbroken” (Davis 2000, 195). Freud’s patricide narrative functioned as an *unverifiable* “explanatory grid” (Davis 2000, 196). Despite this, Freud would continue the narrative by theorizing a shift from the primal horde state with a tyrannical father to a fraternal clan comprised of brothers renouncing their instinctual desires. This process is the birth of the conscious: the establishment of a system of codes, rituals, and beliefs denoting the origins of civilization (Davis 2000, 195). The establishment of incest prohibitions (taboos) through totemic organization (ambivalence) is the progenitor to overcoming the primal horde state of nature in the socio-cultural evolution of humans, and in the origin of religion (Freud 1913, 187).

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud posited the potential for civil war following the overthrow of the father. The fraternal rivalry was a decisive moment in his social contract theory, as it was the beginning of political society (Reiff 1959, 216). The brothers’ desire for instinctual sovereignty, which led to the overthrowing of the father and his monopolization of the clan females, was followed by the implementation of inhibitions to prevent civil warfare, dominance, and the regeneration of the primal horde (*ibid*). Thus, the “essential element of civilization” is a social contract between the brothers and a renunciation of instinctual gratification (Freud 1930, 59). Patricide symbolizes the achievement of culture and the origin of the conscious. Furthermore, emotional ambivalence towards the father is a key component in the origin of society and culture beyond the primal horde (Freud 1913, 184). The removal of the father involved abhorring him, while at the same time feeling remorse and guilt. Taboos reflect emotional ambivalence: unconscious desires to transgress prohibitions are accompanied by a stronger terror of breaking the laws to achieve pleasure (Freud 1913, 44). Freud postulated that emotional ambivalence expressed through social taboos (the institutionalization of repression) is akin to the earliest forms of conscience. Ambivalence requires that individuals have the capacity to comprehend their actions and intentions, and taboos exist to rule the conscience by emanating guilty sentiments (Freud 1913, 90). Thus, the creation of taboos and their accompanying sense of ambivalence are preceded by

some form of conscious consideration, whether positive or negative.

It is important to note that Girard and Freud consented on two particular fronts. First, within the primal state humans would act without conscious consideration – actions were impulsive and without reproach. Second, in the earliest formations of society and culture, humans were eventually “governed” by restrictions (1987, 128). Despite such agreements, Girard rejects Freud’s theory of emotional ambivalence. Girard replaces psychical processes with physical causes in his theory of mimetic desire and rivalry. The entire process of maintaining human civilization involves various forms of sacrifice, which are upheld and justified by sacrificing a scapegoat:

...in all human institutions it is necessary to reproduce a reconciliatory murder by means of new victims. The original victim is endowed with superhuman, terrifying prestige because it is seen as the source of all disorder and order. Subsequent victims inherit some of this prestige. One must look to this prestige for the source of all political and religious sovereignty (Girard 1977, 53).

Symbolic patterns, including language and ritual, emerge from the initial mob murder and lessen the potential of mimetic rivalry to cause societal Armageddon (Girard 1987, 125).

Thus, sacrificial rituals are curative and preventative performances as they reinforce social cohesion by both controlling violence (preventing uncontrolled violence) and encouraging self-awareness (curing mob mentality): “In order to perceive the implications of an infinitely mobile mimesis we must realize that the boundless potentiality of violence can only be contained by the operation of the surrogate victim” (Girard 1977, 218). Socio-cultural order, then, is the process of differentiating individuals through the sacrifice of the scapegoat, and allowing individuals to formulate their own self-identity (Girard 1977, 49).

Controlling Violence

Through a literary account of mimesis, Girard argues the Bible is *the* resolution to violence: “The Bible knows about sacrifice and the sacrificial crisis” (1987, 22). He extends this belief in asserting that Judeo-Christian scripture reveals the essence of the

scapegoat theory: “The collectively murdered victim [of the New Testament] is the one who teaches...” (1987, 119). Furthermore, Girard claims Christianity has an ascendancy over all non-Christian religions; mimetic desire and rivalry are concealed throughout religions and literature, though the New Testament “discloses” this process (1987, 118 & 141). Such statements give the impression that Girard’s mimetic desire theory evolves into an act of ecumenical proselytizing. He claims the survival of society depends on religion, that is, religion as described within the Christian tradition: “Only the transcendental quality of the system, acknowledged by all, can assure the prevention or cure of violence” (1977, 24). However, the following statement is intriguing: “[t]here is no society without religion because without religion society cannot exist” (Girard 1977, 221). It would seem that Girard is arguing for a pluralistic religious ethic, though in reality, when discussing religion and sacrifice, Girard is talking about Christianity. For Girard, the legitimacy of the scapegoat sacrifice is best represented within the Christian tradition. He warns against the removal of religion from institutions and ethical mandates, and regards the rejection of Christian supremacy over institutions and ethics as anathema (1977, 307). Girard denies evolutionary theory, arguing for the superiority of the surrogate victim theory as described in the New Testament (*ibid*). However, he argues: “[in] order to retain its structuring influence the generative violence must remain hidden; misapprehension is indispensable to all religious or postreligious structuring” (*ibid*).³ In essence, Girard conveys a mass missionary regime to support the dominance of Christian teachings.

Girard’s ideas of religion and the divine are antipodal to Freud’s own ideas. Rather than attribute authority to the divine, Freud suggested it was more conducive to acknowledge the human underpinnings of socio-cultural existence (1927, 41). Thus, regulations would be recognized as being created for the prosperity of humanity:

...it would be an undoubted advantage if we were to leave God out altogether and honestly admit the purely human origin of all the regulations and precepts of

³ This leaves Girard sceptical of contemporary legal processes because the structuring of the scapegoat is revealed.

civilization. Along with their pretended sanctity, these commandments and laws would lose their rigidity and unchangeableness as well. People could understand that they are made, not so much to rule them as, on the contrary, to serve their interests; and they would adopt a more friendly attitude to them, and instead of aiming at their abolition, would aim only at their improvement. This would be an important advance along the road which leads to becoming reconciled to the burden of civilization. (Freud 1927, 41)

Freud suggested by rejecting religion the calamities of civilization would largely diminish. He aimed to dismantle religion and reconcile the discontents of civilization through science: "...civilization runs a greater risk if we maintain our present attitude to religion than if we give it up" (Freud 1927, 35). Conversely, Girard claims religion will eventually reconcile violence and create a content civilization. Nevertheless, Freud proposed science as a methodology to discover the world: "We believe that it is possible for scientific work to gain some knowledge about the reality of the world, by means which we can increase our power and in accordance with which we can arrange our life" (1927, 55). He predicted the application of reason as the only way to maintain socio-cultural formations; science and reason were the ultimate system while mythology and religion represented dangerous illusions.

Freud speculated if the prospect of an afterlife was removed and all concentration was centered on earthly existence, it was likely a condition could be attained where "...life will become tolerable for everyone and civilization no longer oppressive to anyone" (1927, 50). The absurdities of religious doctrines must be gradually removed from civilization and replaced by intellectual advancement, for "...we have no other means of controlling our instinctual nature but our intelligence" (Freud 1927, 48). This was achieved through an "experimental" process of "*education to reality*" (Freud 1927, 49). Perhaps it is possible that Freud's theory on earthly existence – an education to reality – is a plausible solution for reducing suffering and violence.

Conclusion

In discussing the primal murder, Girard chooses to disassociate from Freud's work. Freud attempted to construct the origins of religion through its socio-cultural history, whereas Girard concerns himself with the "nature of mythology". In his choice to focus on a "generative principle", Girard casts away any desire to form historical insights (1987, 89). Furthermore, while Freud accepted his theory of primal murder as mere postulation, Girard conceives his theory "to be a theory of something; indeed, he wants it to be a theory of everything" (Davis 2000, 202). Although Freud yearned for his theory to be true, he admitted it was a "Just-so" narrative, a perception after the fact attempting to decipher the past (1921, 122). Therefore, the power of *Totem and Taboo* is not its historical validity, but its function as an "organizing hypothesis", a process of Freud's systematization of psychoanalysis (Davis 2000, 198). Girard is averse to competition: "he wants his version of sacrifice to be more firmly grounded, a revealed and revelatory truth of unimpeachable validity" (Davis 2000, 203). As a result, his texts become self-verifying. Notwithstanding his denial of the link between fiction and theory, Girard becomes the victim of his own narrative – he is both the victim and the hero of scapegoating – a martyr imbued with knowledge that others lack and fail to comprehend. Davis considers whether Girard actually has a desire to become a prophet (2000, 201).

While Freud's theories may not be fact – and there is certainly no shortage of critics to support this – he opened a forum for questioning, testing, and revising his theory in accordance with the general trend of scientific endeavours. Girard, on the other hand, argues the truth has already been revealed, and it is up to others to learn the truth or suffer the consequences. Girard is a "theoretical realist", a "pre-post modern thinker" (Davis 2000, 201). He wants to eliminate the possibility that his theory may lack validity by "anchoring his theory in a bedrock of truth" (Davis 2000, 202). Thus, Girard treats Freud's perspective as misguided, replacing Freud's errors with his own accurate vision of the truth. In a way, Girard commits patricide in his desire to become the father and remove Freud from his dominant position as a radical theorist largely influencing modern western thought.

Girard vindicates Christianity, including Christian (scapegoat) violence, instead of engaging in a critical analysis of

how to placate the human tendency for violence. He denies there can be peace without Christianity, though ironically, Girard claims that for peace to exist there must be some form violence: “Violence is the heart and secret soul of the Sacred” (1977, 41). Nonetheless, he claims sacrificial violence is “arbitrary” and inexact (1977, 41). Propagating inexact-sacrificial practices of violence could act as a catalyst for uncontrollable violence. Furthermore, Girard rejects humanism, claiming it to be an illusory approach assuaging violence: “we must acknowledge mankind’s thorough dependence on religion” (1977, 218).

Freud deconstructed the human desire and propensity for violence, and conceptualized society as having originated from violence, though tools would have eventually replaced brute muscular strength: “the winner was the one who had the better weapons or who used them the more skilfully” (Freud 1932, 204). With the advent of weapons, Freud conceived “intellectual superiority” replacing brute strength. Nevertheless, the ambition of violence remained the same: to eradicate the other (Freud 1932, 204). According to Freud, the desire for violence, that is, the desire to dominate and become a tyrant remains *ad infinitum* (1932, 205). The purpose of the community is to control, organize, maintain, and regulate individuals in order to achieve some form of equilibrium. Freud claimed the only way to control violent urges was through rationalism and nurturing *uber mensch*, which essentially described the process of overcoming unconscious desires through conscious thought. This process involves a “cultural transformation of individuals”, and requires individuals to overcome and suppress their (anti-social) desires to protect and maintain societal equilibrium (Freud 1932, 206). Freud described this is an ongoing process that necessitates a continuous and delicate balance between justice and power (1932, 203).

Endeavours to regulate violence are vital, not only for the preservation of society and culture, but for the preservation of humanity. Christianity has a history of violence, though the same goes for many other religions and non-religious movements. Girard defends Christianity, though he ignores its historical background, thus he is unable to put forth a more holistic theory of many shared answers and possibilities. As Girard argues to protect the (Christian) status quo, Freud’s psychoanalytic theory strived to understand the biological rootedness of violence through scientific principles, offering a

response and methodology to control, prevent, and appease violent urges. Thus, Girard's work reflects Orwell's dictum in *1984* "War is Peace", whereas Freud attempted to defeat this maxim and overcome the adage, "Ignorance is Strength."

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My Name is Sacrifice: An Interpretation of Power in Saint Faustina

Renate Anna Kandler

Abstract: Nineteenth century phenomenologist Gerardus van der Leeuw studied human phenomena as it relates to power. He identified gift giving in sacrificial traditions as the locus of power; donor and recipient are bound to each other, giving of themselves, and enabling the continual flow of power. This essay applies van der Leeuw's schema to consider the case of the Christian mystic, Saint Faustina (1905-1938), whose life was characterized by sacrifice. Faustina mimicked Christ as *sacerdos et hostia* through the embodiment of self-sacrifice. Through van der Leeuw's understanding of the sacrificial, Faustina is re-conceptualized from a figure of humility and meekness to an individual of great power; subject and object become blurred as Faustina and God participate in an exchange of power, leaving Faustina powerful, but ultimately without agency and locked into a life of servitude.

Introduction

The late nineteenth century Phenomenologist Gerardus van der Leeuw argued that power, subject, and object motivated the sacrificial act of gift giving.¹ I apply van der Leeuw's concept of sacrificial gift giving, including its motivations, when examining the case of St. Faustina (1905-1938) whose mystical connections led her to endure great suffering and sacrifice.² It is important to examine how van der Leeuw's phenomenological treatment of sacrifice as a powerful gift addresses self-sacrifice in the context

¹ Van der Leeuw described his ideas in a two volume work entitled, *Religion and Manifestation*, which is a central text used in this research. Gerardus van der Leeuw. 1967. *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, ed. Peter Smith. London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd.

² Not only was Faustina rejected numerous times from joining a convent, her diaries were also banned for two decades. Pope John Paul II beatified Faustina in 1993 and canonized her in April of 2000. John Allen. 2002 August 30. "Divine Mercy Pope's Mantra during Poland Visit: a Saint despite Vatican Reservations." *National Catholic Reporter*, World section, 5.

of St. Faustina who, as a Christian mystic, literally *embodied* sacrifice. In applying van der Leeuw's theory within the broader context of the Christian mystic, I will re-conceptualize St. Faustina as an empowered woman who lacked agency, and consider whether her self-sacrifice can be understood as the *gift of oneself* – the embodied medium representing the ultimate sacrificial act of gift giving.

Gerardus Van der Leeuw's Phenomenological Approach

Central to van der Leeuw's philosophy was his interpretation of phenomenology, which is traditionally known to seek out the essential and elemental of religion.³ His attitude towards phenomenology was in part due to fellow Phenomenologist Chantepie de la Saussaye.⁴ Like Saussaye, van der Leeuw attempted to "comprehend the objective appearances of religion in light of subjective processes"⁵. Unlike others, van der Leeuw did not strive to maintain a purely objective approach; instead, he suggested the impossibility of analyzing ultimate experiences and emotionally charged events from a perspective dominated by what he termed "pure intellectual restraint".⁶ For van der Leeuw, the horizontal plain is inadequate; the essence of religion can only be understood from above, beginning with God.⁷ There is a *necessary* existential attitude toward religion, creating a bias *for* religion. Van der Leeuw criticized those who denied the influence of their own beliefs on the way they observed and understood the world. According to van der Leeuw, this denial is

³ George A. James. 1985. Phenomenology and the Study of Religion: The Archaeology of an Approach. *The Journal of Religion*: 329-330.

⁴ P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye. 1981. *Manual of the Science of Religion*, trans. Beatrice S. Colyer Fergusson. New York: Longmans, Green & Co.

⁵ Van der Leeuw, 694.

⁶ Van der Leeuw, 646.

⁷ Van der Leeuw, 679.

“fatal”⁸ because it attempts to separate oneself from one’s beliefs. The attempt to distance ourselves from our beliefs for the purpose of avoiding prejudices or more subjective interpretations becomes futile. Van der Leeuw used Husserl’s term *epoche*⁹ in his search for a balance between objectivity and subjectivity. Van der Leeuw defined *epoche* as an attempt to avoid prejudicial assessments by using a measure of objectivity. Although van der Leeuw did not discount the necessity of academic objectivity, his research was conducted from the position of self-surrendering love, where he sought meaning and understanding above all else.¹⁰ Furthermore, in staying true to phenomenology, van der Leeuw did not consider theological proclamations as data; instead, meaning was found in the way people *responded* to revelations – it was in this moment that one could see the reflection of the divine on the faces of individuals.¹¹ Although, van der Leeuw conducted his research as a Christian, his approach to phenomenology stood apart from his theological tradition. He acknowledged the need to separate phenomenology from theology, as both are methods in their own right; however, he did not deny his own background as a Christian.

St. Faustina as Helena Kowalska

Saint Mary Faustina Kowalska, first known as Helena Kowalska, was born August 25, 1905 in Glogowiec, Poland. She was the third of ten children born of a poor peasant family. Her obedience, affinity for prayer, strong work ethic, and compassion

⁸ Van der Leeuw, 645. This certainly does not uphold the standards of objectivity we hold in such high esteem today. It is, however, refreshingly honest. Van der Leeuw asserted his perspective. We can only recognize his assertion and continue to search for meaning in his scholarship on its own terms.

⁹ See Edmund Husserl. 1973. *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

¹⁰ Van der Leeuw, 684. Van der Leeuw was not suggesting that objectivity be unnecessary. He was simply suggesting the impossibility of putting one’s faith aside. Van der Leeuw would always remain a Christian, and it was inevitable that his faith influence his scholarship.

¹¹ James, 329.

for the poor marked her from an early age. By age seven, Helena Kowalska felt compelled to pursue a religious vocation. She attended school for several years before leaving home to work as a housekeeper. Upon gaining her independence, Helena made several attempts to join a convent, though her attempts would prove unsuccessful on account of her inability to furnish the required dowry. Finally, on August 1, 1925 Helena joined Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, and was initiated April 30, 1926 as Sister Faustina of the Blessed Sacrament. Faustina remained with Our Lady of Mercy working as a cook, gardener, and porter until her death on October 5, 1938 in Krakow, Poland, of tuberculosis.¹² On the surface, nothing in her life appeared out of the ordinary. But for Faustina, her days were filled with communication with God and the Blessed Mother, as well as Angels, Saints, and souls in Purgatory.¹³ As described in her Vatican biography and personal diaries, Faustina experienced “revelations, visions, hidden stigmata, she participated in the Passion of the Lord, had the gift of bilocation, the reading of human souls, the gift of prophesy and the rare gift of mystical engagement and marriage”¹⁴. Her diaries offer firsthand accounts of her mystical encounters and private musings.¹⁵ Faustina’s message is one of trust and mercy: the mercy of God and mercy towards our

¹² Allen, 6.

¹³ Faustina had her first vision in 1931. Matthew Schmalz. 2008. “Tender Mercies: Suffering meets Consolation in the Chaplet of Divine Mercy.” *Practicing Catholic*, 37.

¹⁴ Faustina, 1107.

¹⁵ Faustina, 1693: “Secretary of My most profound mystery – the Lord Jesus said to Sister Faustina – know that your task is to write down everything that I make known to you about My mercy, for the benefit of those who by reading these things will be comforted in their souls and will have the courage to approach Me.”

Schmalz, 37: Pope John Paul II made the comment that Faustina was chosen to be Jesus’ secretary.

neighbours.¹⁶ Today, millions of people around the world are involved in Faustina's vision under the title of Divine Mercy. Although Faustina is remembered as a pious messenger in mainstream Catholicism, current research focuses on her powerful position as a woman of strength and ability; one who chose to give up her will and agency.¹⁷ Faustina's obedience began with her parents, eventually shifting towards her order by relinquishing her autonomy in pursuit of God. In finding God, Faustina was faced with a complete annihilation of the will. Her enduring pain for God led the poorly educated, impoverished, and suffering woman once known as Helena to offer her very soul to become a secretary for Jesus.¹⁸

Sacrifice is a founding element of Catholicism, with Christ's death at the cross representing the ultimate form of suffering and sacrifice.¹⁹ Faustina belonged to a long line of female Christian mystics who took pleasure in suffering for Christ; where pain took on the role of sacrament.²⁰ Faustina welcomed sacrifice and perceived suffering as an opportunity for spiritual growth by receiving the sins of others through her own emotional and physical pain. At times, she was "seized with violent pain", losing consciousness as a result.²¹ Faustina was taught by her order to welcome pain with love; in fact, she believed love *was* suffering and sacrifice. Ultimately this self

¹⁶ Faustina was also entrusted with three tasks. The first was to remind the world of God's merciful love towards all humans. The second was entreating God's mercy for sinners through new devotions, for example, performing the Chaplet to Divine Mercy at the Hour of Mercy – 3 pm. The last was to start the apostolic movement to proclaim and entreat Mercy and to strive for 'Christian perfection.'

¹⁷John Allen, 5.

¹⁸ Faustina, 1693.

¹⁹ Robert Orsi. 2003. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who study them*. Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 27.

²⁰ Ellen Ross. 1993. "She Wept and Cried Right Loud for Sorrow and for Pain: Suffering, the Spiritual Journey and Women's Experience in Late Medieval Mysticism," in *Maps of Flesh and Light the Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus. 45-59. New York: Syracuse University.

²¹ Faustina, 1276.

denial was understood as self fulfilment.²² William James claims: “In the religious life... surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused, even unnecessary giving-ups are added in order that happiness may increase.”²³ Faustina’s sacrifice and suffering was her gift to God and in exchange for her suffering God gave her power. During a period of mystical communication Faustina was approached by God about the prospect of her becoming a *victim offering*. In her diary she explained her fate by saying, “My name is to be: *sacrifice*.”²⁴ It was of her own free will and consent that Faustina became a living sacrifice.²⁵ Interestingly, Faustina’s experiences closely resembled those of Catholic philosopher, Blaise Pascal, who, after his own secret mystical experience, was ready for the “struggles and hardships of the Way – the deliberate pain and sacrifice of love.”²⁶

Gerardus van der Leeuw: The Role of Power and Sacrifice

Faustina mentioned sacrifice one hundred and twelve times in her six notebooks. Clearly it is outside the scope of this paper to analyze every one of these instances, though I have chosen a apt selection from her writings²⁷ to examine her thoughts on the

²² Evelyn Underhill. 2002. *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 65.

²³ William James. 2002. *Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Routledge, 77.

²⁴ ‘Victim soul’ or ‘victim offering’ is defined by its use in Catholic theology. It represents an individual who undergoes great suffering in union with, and using the example of, Christ’s own suffering. This is done on behalf of the world. Catherine O’Dell. 1998. *Faustina: Apostle of Divine Mercy*. Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 67. This occurred in the autumn or winter of 1932.

²⁵ Faustina followed in Christ’s footsteps once more by choosing to suffer for others. A more in depth analysis would reveal great similarities between Faustina and Christ.

²⁶ Underhill, 379.

²⁷ Faustina’s notebooks have been published under the title of: *Divine Mercy in my Soul*. Mary Faustina Kowalska. “Divine Mercy In My Soul,” Stockbridge: Congregation of Marians of the Immaculate Conception, <http://www.saint-faustina.com/Diary/DMIMS1.shtml> (accessed October 7, 2009).

matter, and to consider her role within van der Leeuw's concept of sacrifice.

Van der Leeuw characterized phenomenology as a study in "how man conducts himself in his relation to power."²⁸ Power can be conceived in innumerable ways, though all power is ultimately of the same substance, creating a single power that 'overflows into all things.'²⁹ Everything has the potential for power. When objects are in close proximity to power, they can become infected with its potency.³⁰ People authenticate power. Moreover, the meaning people bestow onto things (symbols) authenticates power; it is all made possible through a process of recognition and application.³¹ Thus, power is highly influential and transformative, and although Faustina's power is largely hidden, it goes beyond the power of everyday Christians as she is in direct communication with God. Van der Leeuw also argued that the power conferred onto people and objects denotes sacredness.³² For example, when communicating with the sacred we become involved with it, and are ultimately touched by its power.³³ This phenomenon clearly occurs in Faustina's relationship to God. Thus, power forms the basis of religion and is the primary concern of nature. It awakens a sense of awe in the human soul, which can be manifested as fear and attraction, terror and love.³⁴ However, according to van der Leeuw's scheme, Faustina's power would be rendered less effectual because her devotion opens sources of greater power, increasing her dependency on God who is also bound, though maintains

²⁸ Van der Leeuw, 191.

²⁹ Van der Leeuw, 34.

³⁰ Van der Leeuw, 37.

³¹ Van der Leeuw, 27-28.

³² Van der Leeuw, 28.

³³ Van der Leeuw, 191.

³⁴ Van der Leeuw, 23-24. Otto describes this feeling of dependence as a creature feeling, making us acutely aware of our "creature-hood" in the face of something greater. Rudolf Otto. 1977. *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. London: Oxford University Press.

authority.³⁵ The flow of power continues between them, although the balance of power is largely uneven, thus rendering her power less effectual.

Van der Leeuw identified the gift and gift giving as the most significant aspect of sacrifice. It acts as a conduit for power, binding donor and recipient. A gift may be offered to a person, God, community, or perhaps to no one in particular, and it must be accepted to maintain the flow of power.³⁶ The recipient is under the power of the giver and a gift is expected in return³⁷; communion is established through gift giving for the mystical power of the gift establishes *communio*.³⁸ Sacrifice, then, belongs to the community, and the community is strengthened through the process of power and exchange.³⁹ Van der Leeuw claims that the classical conceptualization involving gods and sacrifice, *Du-et-des*, or, *I give that thou mayest give*, breaks down and challenges the idea that gods must be present in sacrifice.⁴⁰ He revises the *du-et-des* into “*do et possis dare*, I give in order that thou mayest be able to give: I give thee power so that thou mayest have power and that life may not stagnate because of any lack of potency.”⁴¹ As we give, a part of ourselves is externalized and we vicariously give of ourselves.⁴²

Faustina conceptualized sacrifice as a gift to Jesus and hoped to perfect her own self-sacrifice, thus presenting herself to

³⁵ God revealed that even the missionaries cannot produce the same positive results as compared to Faustina; truly she was given great authority and power.

³⁶ Van der Leeuw described the transition of sacrificing oneself to the eventual sacrificing of only part of oneself, which led to the sacrificing of someone else, and finally the sacrificing an animal or a cake.

³⁷ Van der Leeuw, 351.

³⁸ Van der Leeuw, 352.

³⁹ Van der Leeuw, 358. One could speculate that Faustina’s community is human souls; the power she receives from sacrifice is used for their benefit, freeing them from purgatory (for instance) and strengthening the community.

⁴⁰ Van der Leeuw sided with Smith on the idea of a communal meal where God is a participant.

⁴¹ Van der Leeuw, 354.

⁴² Van der Leeuw, 355.

Jesus as the ultimate offering. Faustina claimed that Jesus told her both love and sacrifice sustained the world; he took pleasure in her sacrifice and told Faustina of its power.⁴³ God gave Faustina strength so she might continue to suffer for lost souls while following in the footsteps of Christ: “My sacrifice is nothing in itself, but when I join it to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it becomes all-powerful and has the power to appease divine wrath.”⁴⁴ Her sacrificial gift was a live burnt offering. Faustina claims God came to her and said: “I demand of you a perfect and whole-burnt offering; an offering of the will. No other sacrifice can compare with this one. I myself am directing your life and arranging things in such a way that you will be for me a continual sacrifice and will always do My will.”⁴⁵ In the style of the Old Testament, Faustina was not only a sacrifice; she was also a perpetual, perfect, and incomparable sacrifice, giving up her free will for God. God said to her:

You must be annihilated, destroyed, living as if you were dead in the most secret depths of your being. You must be destroyed in that secret depth where the human eye has never penetrated; then will I find in you a pleasing sacrifice, a holocaust full of sweetness and fragrance. And great will be your power for whomever you intercede.⁴⁶

Faustina refused herself – she was totally destroyed and dead to herself so that she might be remade as a sweet and pleasing sacrifice. This is a common theme for mystics whose motto, “*I am nothing, I have nothing, I desire nothing*”, compliments extreme denial, humility, and submission before the All.⁴⁷ This

⁴³ Faustina, 904.

⁴⁴ Faustina, 482.

⁴⁵ Faustina, 1937 February 7, 923.

⁴⁶ Faustina, 1767. God refers to a holocaust of sweetness and fragrance. In the Old Testament the Lord is pleased by the smell of the burnt offerings, now the offerings are internalized, though just as sweet. These are interesting points for theological analysis. This may be compared with section 923 where Faustina is a whole burnt offering.

⁴⁷ Underhill, 400.

humility, more common of Catholic mystics, was especially emphasized by Faustina, the Secretary of Christ. Faustina did gain great power, though her power was constrained by God. She had the power to live out God's will, but not her own; the power to be an instrument, but not an individual with agency. Faustina was also powerful enough to use her body for others, though this required her to exchange her pain for their wellbeing. She could intercede on behalf of souls, but ultimately God defined the level and direction of her abilities. Ultimately, her power tied her to God; she was bound to God in servitude of his power and he was bound to give her power because of her sacrifice to him.

Van der Leeuw's concept of power did not require the theological notion of God (or gods) as power. The Christian notion of God and the sacrifice of Christ are later additions to his theory of power, but remain interesting additions nonetheless.⁴⁸ Van der Leeuw explained: "The idea of the vicarious sacrifice of Christ should therefore be interpreted from this viewpoint ... the sacrifice demanded from man being accomplished by Him who is simultaneously sacrificer and sacrificee, *sacerdos et hostia*."⁴⁹ The idea of a gift stream is connected to the Christian concept of a personal God and saviour who embodies sacrifice. The Christian Eucharist is an "intensification of the mystic and primitive idea of *du-et-des*."⁵⁰ The same entity can offer and receive itself without contradiction. This is the essence of sacrifice: something can be offered and received at the same time for it "is the essence of all sacrifice that it is simultaneously offered and received."⁵¹ To this extent the sacrificee and sacrificer are exchanging roles. Who is binding whom? Subject and object blur when sacrifice is expressed through gift giving; gift giver and gift can exchange roles in the same manner as sacrificer and sacrificee. Van der Leeuw used Levy Bruhl's

⁴⁸ The application we are addressing in St. Faustina is therefore a later application of sacrifice. Van der Leeuw, 354.

⁴⁹ Van der Leeuw, 356.

⁵⁰ Van der Leeuw, 359. Van der Leeuw was concerned with the transformation of repetitive sacrifice being made into automatism. Van der Leeuw referred to the Eucharist as the repeated, bloodless, sacrifice of Christ. It "need repeal neither the unique sacrificial deed of Christ nor the making of the thank-offering on the church's part, which is possible only in the concrete situation."

⁵¹ Van der Leeuw, 359.

interpretation of sacrifice as a comparison. Levy Bruhl thought participating in the gift meant both giver and receiver were also participating in one another.⁵² Sacrifice as gift giving entails the impossibility of knowing who gives and who receives as each is intimately connected to the same power despite the possible presence of God (or gods).

St. Faustina, along with Christ, belongs to the category of *sacerdos et hostia*. She is both sacrificee and sacrificer, giving and receiving in the same cyclical flow, uniting the subject and the object of sacrifice. Van der Leeuw argued there is a flowing stream between both parties “but without God’s act of volition and also without the church’s gratitude ... [power] is striving with Will and Form.”⁵³ For better or for worse, then, it was Faustina’s interaction with God and her sacrificial offering of the self that initiated the exchange of power she would experience between herself and God.

Conclusion

Van der Leeuw’s phenomenological schema successfully applies to St. Faustina’s experiences of power in mystic self-sacrifice. Their compatibility is partly due to the Christian framework they both share, though their particular theological understandings of events vary.⁵⁴ St. Faustina was traditionally understood as a Saint of mercy and humility, however, a greater understanding of St. Faustina demonstrates her dimensions of power and authority through the gift of self-sacrifice and suffering. St. Faustina rose from a position of powerlessness as a woman without means to a nun who relinquished her life in service, and ultimately she offered her complete self and will before God. By relinquishing her limited degree of autonomy, St. Faustina gained incredible power, though that power would bind her to suffering for others as her conscience dictated. In considering van der Leeuw’s theory of the gift as power we have discovered that the flow of

⁵² Van der Leeuw, 352.

⁵³ Van der Leeuw, 359.

⁵⁴ Van der Leeuw’s perspective that God can be bound in gift exchange, and that power does not come exclusively from God, clashes with Faustina’s understanding and with that of the Catholic Church.

power is not always equivalent on both sides, nor is power freeing. In the case of St. Faustina, power was unequally binding. Thus, the gift stream was transformative, shifting St. Faustina into a field of great power, but ultimately causing her to lose herself and to suffer body and soul in the process.

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De Hubert et Mauss à Valeri : le sacrifice védique, son public, sa violence

Marie-Josée Blanchard

Abstrait : L'étude détaillée du sacrifice védique par Hubert et Mauss possède une lacune, en ce qu'elle n'explique pas le rôle du public lors de ce rituel. Grâce à la superposition du modèle hawaïen de Valeri sur cette théorie du sacrifice védique, nous nous rendons vite compte que le public possédait à l'ère védique le rôle hautement significatif de la validation du rituel qui venait de prendre place. À cette découverte, nous ajoutons une analyse symbolique de la violence inhérente au sacrifice védique, qui était pourtant niée au sein du rituel ; par là, cette violence acquiert le statut de non-violence.

Introduction

Le védisme, considéré comme l'une des formes les plus anciennes de l'hindouisme, se fonde sur les textes fondateurs de l'hindouisme, soit les *Vedas*, regroupés en quatre recueils d'hymnes en vers. Les *Brāhmanas*, commentaires ou interprétations sur la parole védique, suivent de près les *Vedas*. C'est à l'intérieur des *Brāhmanas* que l'on retrouve la doctrine du sacrifice et la justification théologique au rite sacrificiel hindou, rituel particulièrement rigoureux. Or, l'Inde védique ne possédait pas d'images de la divinité ni de temples ; le culte central était le sacrifice. On considérait le sacrifice comme le « nombril » de l'univers¹ et on le performait afin de maintenir l'ordre du cosmos (pour que le soleil se lève, que les pluies permettent les récoltes, etc.). Par conséquent, tous les êtres terrestres étaient structurés autour du sacrifice, qui était pourtant un rituel dangereux nécessitant la connaissance de sa science ; c'est pourquoi seul le brahmane, spécialiste du sacrifice, pouvait performer ce type de rituel. Parallèlement, c'est autour du sacrifiant et pour lui que le sacrifice était organisé.

¹ Leela Devi. 1989. *Vedic Gods and Some Hymns*. Sri Garib Dass Oriental 88. Delhi : Sri Satguru Publications, 37.

Le présent essai se donnera pour objectif, après avoir exploré les fondements du sacrifice védique, de développer la théorie du rituel sacrificiel védique, élaborée en grande partie par Henri Hubert et Marcel Mauss en 1899², grâce à une comparaison avec la théorie du sacrifice hawaïen de Valerio Valeri³. Nous apporterons une importance particulière au rôle du public dans le sacrifice védique, qui s'assurait, avec l'aide du *brahman*, de juger si le rituel avait été bien performé et donc, si ses résultats seraient bénéfiques ou non. Aussi, bien que Valeri n'explore pas le rôle de la violence dans sa théorie du sacrifice (en rejetant les théories de René Girard et Walter Burkert, qui selon nous ne sont pas non plus pertinentes en ce qui concerne le sacrifice védique), nous nous attarderons à son exploration, et plus particulièrement aux techniques mises en place afin de nier cette violence, pourtant inhérente au cycle de vie et de mort du cosmos, et donc, au sacrifice. Nous pourrions par là dénoter le début du développement de la pensée hindoue classique, qui donnera naissance à l'idée de non-violence (*āhimsā*), philosophie également partagée par le bouddhisme et le jaïnisme⁴.

L'Importance de la cosmogonie et la mythologie dans le rituel védique

La divinité occupe une importance primordiale dans le rituel hindou, tout comme la cosmogonie hindoue est centrale au sacrifice védique ; c'est dans la cosmogonie, et plus particulièrement dans l'histoire relative au dieu Prajāpati⁵, qui a été le premier à être sacrifié, que le sacrifice védique trouve sa source et sa nécessité. C'est pourquoi on dit du sacrifice védique

² Henri Hubert et Marcel Mauss. 1899. « Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice », *L'Année sociologique* II : 29-138.

³ Valerio Valeri. 1985. *Kingship and Sacrifice: Ritual and Society in Ancient Hawaii*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Pour une exploration plus générale du sacrifice à l'intérieur des religions, se référer à la section « Études générales » de la bibliographie.

⁵ Prajāpati, le « seigneur des créatures », est aussi connu sous le nom de Puruṣa dans le *Rig-Veda*.

qu'il était l'acte rituel par excellence, car il recréait l'histoire du début du cosmos basé sur ce premier sacrifice⁶.

Plusieurs mythes expliquent le rôle de Prajāpati dans le panthéon hindou. On dit parfois de lui qu'il est né de la fusion des sept mâles primordiaux formés par le non-être à l'origine de l'univers. Ainsi, un jour où il ressentit le désir brûlant de procréer afin de créer le monde, Prajāpati « fit de son désir un échauffement ascétique »⁷ en se sacrifiant lui-même pour créer le cosmos. D'autres versions de ce mythe affirment que Prajāpati devint à la fois « sacrifiant, sacrifice, celui à qui on offre le sacrifice et le résultat de ce sacrifice » (traduction libre)⁸. Il procéda ainsi à l'éparpillement de sa substance, donnant naissance aux êtres et aux dieux, et à son démembrement, qui donna naissance aux divers éléments du cosmos. Suite à la création du monde, Prajāpati était épuisé, vidé ; il demanda donc à son fils Agni (qui fût également aidé de ses frères et sœurs) de reconstituer ses membres disloqués afin de rétablir son unicité. Dès lors, toute chose serait née de ce premier sacrifice, allant des castes hindoues jusqu'aux éléments de la galaxie.

Agni, dieu du feu et feu sacrificiel en soi, prit beaucoup d'importance au sein du sacrifice védique, étant donné son rôle primordial dans le remembrement de son père, Prajāpati. Agni est à la fois le feu qui consume les offrandes, le feu de la cuisson, ainsi que le feu de la digestion⁹. Dès lors, lorsqu'une offrande était jetée dans le feu, le dieu Agni attendait que celle-ci soit suffisamment cuite avant de l'amener aux autres dieux. C'est pourquoi on dit du dieu Agni, porteur d'offrandes, qu'il était le pont entre le monde des mortels et celui des dieux ; il était le médiateur et l'ami de l'homme, messenger des hommes et des dieux. C'est également Agni qui pouvait convoquer les dieux à venir prendre place au banquet sacrificiel, où ils étaient les premiers servis. Agni, qui cuisait la nourriture amenée aux dieux,

⁶ C'est pourquoi le mot « sacrifice », en sanskrit, se dit *yajña*, ce qui signifie « naître en mouvement ».

⁷ Marcelle Saindon. 2000. « Aux sources du rituel funéraire hindou : le sacrifice védique », dans *Cérémonies funéraires et postfunéraires en Inde : La tradition derrière les rites*. Québec : Presses de l'Université Laval et L'Harmattan, 36.

⁸ Devi, *Vedic Gods*, 2.

⁹ Voir Charles Malamoud. 1989. *Cuire le monde : rite et pensée dans l'Inde ancienne*. Paris : Éditions La Découverte.

était donc considéré comme « la bouche des dieux », bouche par laquelle les dieux pouvaient se nourrir et s'abreuver¹⁰.

Finalement, une autre version du mythe cosmogonique védique attribue le premier sacrifice de Prajāpati à un châtement pour le punir d'inceste (il se serait transformé en antilope afin de s'unir à sa fille, Usas), châtement pris en charge par Rudra¹¹, dieu créé à cet effet en combinant ce que chacun des dieux avait de plus terrible. Rudra, faisant lui-même partie du monde extérieur et interdit, se chargea conséquemment de ramener Prajāpati dans les normes en perçant sa gorge d'une lance. Le sacrifice, donc, devient cette délimitation du cosmos, de l'espace « bon », central et sacré, en opposition à l'espace « mauvais », sauvage, inconnu, profane et périphérique¹².

Ainsi, le sacrifice védique représentait une répétition de la dispersion des membres de Prajāpati (et de son remembrement) lors de ce sacrifice premier, et donc une imitation des dieux. Le rituel le plus révélateur à ce niveau reste l'*agnicayana*, qui consistait à construire un autel de briques cuites disposées en forme d'oiseau avec les ailes déployées : cette construction remémorait la reconstitution de Prajāpati. Cet autel n'était pas « la maison de dieu, [mais plutôt] son corps »¹³, recouvert « d'une sixième couche invisible, qui n'est autre que la Parole »¹⁴.

Le déroulement du sacrifice védique

Le sacrifice qui nous intéresse particulièrement ici est celui en l'honneur des dieux et des *pitṛi* (ancêtres), où le feu sacrificiel était toujours présent. Ce sacrifice était exécuté à la demande du

¹⁰ Voir Saindon, « Rituel funéraire hindou ».

¹¹ Rudra deviendra plus tard Shiva ; c'est pourquoi on le nomme souvent Rudra-Shiva.

¹² Mircea Eliade a écrit à ce sujet une fascinante analyse de la symbolique du « Centre » dans le premier chapitre de son livre *Images et symboles : essais sur le symbolisme magico-religieux* (Paris : PUF, 1976), 33-72.

¹³ Charles Malamoud. 2005. *Féminité de la parole : Études sur l'Inde ancienne*. Paris : Albin Michel, 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

sacrifiant (et de son épouse), homme assez fortuné, qui demandait alors aux prêtres officiants et à un *brahman*, sorte d'arbitre du sacrifice, de performer ce rituel afin d'obtenir une certaine « faveur » des dieux (une descendance nombreuse en fils, une victoire sur le champ de bataille, etc.). C'est le sacrifiant qui assumait les dépenses du rituel, y compris les honoraires offerts aux sacrificateurs à la fin du rituel ; aussi, c'est l'officiant qui bénéficiait de tous les effets du rituel (positifs ou négatifs). Le rituel sacrificiel, ayant comme public quelques prêtres ne participant pas activement au sacrifice, était donc performé par quatre prêtres principaux et quelques autres officiants, tout en étant supervisé par le *brahman*, « guérisseur », qui avait pour mission de veiller à ce qu'aucune erreur ne se glisse dans la procédure, faute de quoi, le sacrifice ne serait pas bénéfique. Le feu sacrificiel, contenu dans trois foyers distincts, servait à brûler toute offrande, animale ou végétale. L'autel, quant à lui, tracé à même le sol, était recouvert d'herbe sacrificielle où devaient prendre place les dieux et les ancêtres lors du repas suivant le sacrifice.

Après avoir obtenu le consentement de la victime animale, le bourreau pouvait « apaiser son souffle » en l'étranglant à l'extérieur de l'aire sacrificielle, où il la faisait cuire avec l'aide de l'épouse du sacrifiant¹⁵. De l'importance apportée au feu sacrificiel découlait le besoin primordial d'offrir des offrandes cuites aux dieux, car, selon le *Satapatha-Brahmana*, « ce qui est cuit est pour les dieux »¹⁶. Les seuls

¹⁵ L'importance de la présence d'une femme découlait du fait que, donnant elle-même la vie, elle pouvait faire renaître l'animal rituellement en faisant couler de l'eau sur lui. Voir Malamoud, *Féminité de la parole*, 255.

¹⁶ La cuisson était également d'une grande importance à l'intérieur du sacrifice grec et hébreu, où l'animal pouvait être brûlé en entier ou seulement en partie, pour ensuite être dévoré ou non ; cf. Pierre Solié. 1988. *Le sacrifice : Fondateur de civilisation et d'individuation*, Sciences et Symboles. Paris : Albin Michel ; James W. Watts, « *Öläh*: The Rhetoric of Burnt Offerings », *Vetus Testamentum* 56, n° 1 (2006) : 125-37.

aliments qui ne nécessitaient pas de cuisson étaient le *soma*¹⁷, car sa préparation en soi était déjà considérée comme un sacrifice et une cuisson, ainsi que le lait, considéré comme le sperme d'Agni et donc, déjà cuit. La fumée produite par cette offrande végétale ou animale cuite dans le feu montait aux cieux grâce à Agni et était ensuite absorbée, c'est-à-dire inhalée par les dieux : c'était à ce moment que les dieux, invités par le sacrifiant et les sacrificateurs, prenaient place sur l'autel afin de participer au repas sacrificiel, où les divinités se servaient en premier. Les *pitri*, ancêtres représentés par les brahmanes, pouvaient également être invités à prendre place sur l'herbe étendue sur l'autel à cet effet afin de se joindre au festin. Une fois les divinités repues et satisfaites, le sacrifiant, les prêtres et les officiants pouvaient à leur tour manger les restes des dieux.

Application du modèle de Valeri au sacrifice védique

Le sacrifice védique, comme nous avons pu le constater, est particulier et se distingue de la majorité des sacrifices ; mettant en place une mise en scène élaborée, voire même draconienne, il ne vise pourtant qu'une seule personne, qui à elle seule recueille tous les bénéfices du rituel sacrificiel, et ce malgré le travail des sacrificateurs et la présence d'autres prêtres, qui ne semblent être que des instruments du sacrifiant. Ainsi, les théories sur le sacrifice élaborées par Freud ou Durkheim, pour ne nommer que ces deux auteurs, ne peuvent s'appliquer à ce type de sacrifice, étant donné que ces derniers voient dans le sacrifice une façon pour la communauté de renforcer ses liens et perpétuer sa cohésion ; chez ces auteurs, le sacrifice bénéficie à tout le groupe

¹⁷ Le *soma*, associé au dieu portant le même nom, provenait d'une plante dont on devait écraser les tiges afin d'en obtenir un jus brunâtre qui était clarifié ou filtré. Ce jus avait des propriétés hallucinogènes, et provoquait donc chez l'homme, comme chez les dieux, une « sorte d'exaltation euphorique » qui se distinguait de l'ivresse provoquée par l'alcool. Son équivalent, chez les dieux, était l'*amṛta*, substance qui assurait leur immortalité. Voir Charles Malamoud. 1981. « Soma et l'échange. Substance sacrificielle et figure divine dans la mythologie védique », dans *Dictionnaire des mythologies et des religions des sociétés traditionnelles et du monde antique (Volume 2 – K à Z)*, dir. Yves Bonnefoy. Paris : Flammarion, 453-55.

(directement ou non), et non pas à un seul individu¹⁸. Ceci dit, parmi les nombreuses autres théories appliquées au sacrifice, celle de Valerio Valeri semble pouvoir mieux expliquer le déroulement et la nature du sacrifice védique. En empruntant de nombreux termes et idées à Hubert et Mauss, Valeri s'attarde à une description du sacrifice chez les Hawaïiens¹⁹ qui se rapproche curieusement de celui de l'Inde ancienne. Notamment, l'importance accordée au rôle du « public » dans la théorie du sacrifice de Valeri s'avérera particulièrement pertinente pour son application face au sacrifice védique.

Le sacrifice chez Valeri, action purement symbolique, trouve d'abord sa motivation dans une lacune ou un manque quelconque, une imperfection à surmonter. La victime, qui représente le sacrifiant, est par la suite dévorée par les dieux, transformant par là le sacrifiant. Cette victime, par ailleurs, est divisée en deux portions; l'une appartenant au dieu, l'autre ingérée par le sacrifiant et les participants au sacrifice. Le sacrifiant, qui a, en quelque sorte, rejoint le dieu lorsqu'il a été dévoré par ce dernier, retourne à son statut mortel lorsqu'il prend place à ce repas. Ainsi, du stade A d'imperfection, le sacrifiant passe au stade C de guérison ou d'un état meilleur que A, en passant par le stade B de transformation (où, par ailleurs, le dieu subit également une transformation). À ceci, Valeri ajoute un quatrième joueur important lors du sacrifice : le public. Ce dernier participe à la transformation du sacrifiant, étant donné que sa mission finale sera de juger si le rituel a été bien performé, et donc s'il a été efficace ou non. Ainsi, ce n'est pas

¹⁸ Bien entendu, les bénéfices retirés par le sacrifiant lors du sacrifice védique sont idéaux. De façon plus pragmatique, il est notable que le sacrifice permettait un certain « roulement économique » dans la société : les prêtres étaient payés et nourris en accomplissant le sacrifice grâce au sacrifiant qui faisait par là circuler les biens qu'il avait acquis. En ce sens, le sacrifice permettait l'échange (de services) et la survie de la société.

¹⁹ Les observations de Valeri sont fondées sur divers récits écrits entre 1788 et 1825. Le peuple hawaïien était alors basé sur un système de chefferie et de caste semblable à celui des Hindous, où chaque famille se spécialisait en un certain domaine (construction, artisanat, etc.) afin de contribuer à la subsistance de la tribu. En se fondant sur un système complexe de tabous, la société hawaïienne possédait ainsi un code strict accompagnant chaque acte, rituel ou non. Le sacrifice accompagnait conséquemment chaque activité importante, allant de la construction à la pêche, jusqu'à la guerre et la danse, mais pouvait également permettre, par exemple, l'expiation de fautes ou la guérison.

tant le jugement divin qui détermine les bénéfiques du rituel sacrificiel, mais plutôt celui de la collectivité ayant observé la séquence mise en place et ayant confirmé la transformation du sacrifiant. La divinité a tout de même sa part dans cette efficacité, étant donné que c'est elle qui détermine les résultats concrets subséquents au sacrifice (une bonne récolte, une victoire, une guérison, etc.).

Ainsi, suivant ce modèle, le sacrifice dans l'Inde védique est d'abord motivé par le désir, chez le sacrifiant, d'une descendance nombreuse en fils ou d'une victoire dans une éventuelle guerre, par exemple. Ayant fait part de son vœu au *brahman* et aux officiants, à savoir les sacrificateurs, le sacrifiant leur offrait une ou plusieurs victimes pour l'oblation, allant de la victime animale domestiquée et mâle (particulièrement le bouc) jusqu'aux substances végétales (beurre clarifié, miel, riz, sésame, graines, etc.). En donnant quelque chose aux dieux, le sacrifiant s'attendait à recevoir davantage en retour. Ceci dit, ce don devait être fait dans une « pureté d'esprit » parfaite : l'intention derrière elle devait être bonne, et le sacrifiant devait *croire* et avoir confiance, avoir la foi (*śraddhā*) en ce qu'il faisait et demandait. La victime, lors du sacrifice, devenait également une substitution du sacrifiant ; l'abandon d'une partie du sacrifiant était donc le vrai don dans le sacrifice. Il ne s'agissait pas de sacrifier littéralement le sacrifiant, mais seulement symboliquement, afin qu'il n'y laisse pas sa vie. En transférant une partie de lui-même dans l'animal, le sacrifiant espérait suivre ce dernier jusqu'aux dieux où il subirait sa transformation ; le sacrifice, sous cette optique, est donc un « billet aller-retour » vers les cieux, « une barque menant au ciel » tirée par l'animal sacrifié qui, lui, ne revient pas sur terre.

Le repas sacrificiel, en parallèle avec la théorie de Valeri, avait une grande importance dans le sacrifice védique : c'était grâce à la participation des dieux à ce repas que le sacrifiant pouvait subir sa transformation, étant donné qu'il ingérait les restes de la nourriture des dieux et s'appropriait ainsi une « part de divinité ». Comme chez les Hawaïens, la viande cuite (donc, sacrée) dans le sacrifice védique était redistribuée de façon précise aux participants. Bien que toute la viande fût mangée par ces derniers, certains morceaux étaient réservés pour les dieux et les ancêtres, qui étaient représentés par les prêtres. Plus particulièrement, la partie de viande de l'animal (située sur la gorge) qui correspondait à la blessure infligée à Prajāpati par

Rudra pour le punir de son acte incestueux, était offerte au dieu Indra et mangée par son représentant, le *brahman*, qui était le seul à pouvoir accomplir cette tâche sans être blessé. Pour ce faire, il avait recours à Agni, et consommait donc cette offrande par sa bouche, le feu.

Finalement, le public de ce sacrifice, c'est-à-dire les autres prêtres observant le rituel sans y participer activement, et plus particulièrement le *brahman*, avaient un grand rôle à jouer à la fin du sacrifice. C'étaient eux, et spécialement le *brahman*, qui jugeaient, comme nous indique Valeri chez les Hawaïiens, si le rituel sacrificiel avait été bien performé, et donc si les résultats en découlant seraient bénéfiques ou non. Dès lors, la parole avait un rôle central dans le sacrifice védique. En effet, c'était grâce à la parole (spécialement les *mantras* appris par cœur), pouvant être considérée en soi comme une offrande, que le sacrifiant pouvait attirer les bonnes grâces des dieux et retirer les bénéfices du sacrifice. Les formules et hymnes devaient être parfaitement récités (tant les mots que les intonations), et s'avéraient donc la source première de l'efficacité du sacrifice. Ainsi, la parole « bien ajustée » reflétait un esprit « bien ajusté ». C'est également pourquoi le sacrifiant, au début du sacrifice, faisait le vœu de quitter « la fausseté pour aller à la vérité » ; en ne disant que la vérité (c'est-à-dire, en disant les formules prescrites sans les altérer), il quittait (momentanément) le monde des hommes pour aller rejoindre les dieux²⁰.

Il semble que le sacrifiant possédait pourtant une puissance toute particulière ; les dieux ne pouvaient ignorer son appel, et s'il était bien performé, son rituel s'avérait grandement bénéfique. Par ailleurs, le sacrifiant lui-même était traité comme un dieu lors du sacrifice. Cette sorte de *mana* du sacrifiant, également exprimée dans la théorie de Valeri, reflétait une pensée magique assez forte, magie assez puissante pour « manipuler » les dieux en sa faveur²¹. De la même manière, il n'y avait pas lieu à l'innovation dans le rituel sacrificiel, de peur qu'un résultat défavorable en résulte ; « l'action bien faite était

²⁰ Malamoud, *Féminité de la parole*, 15-16.

²¹ Notre définition de « pensée magique » se rapproche de la superstition, d'un point de vue sociologique, où des paroles et/ou gestes précis mènent à un résultat précis (souvent, un « contrôle » de la nature). Si cette action est performée selon les normes, les dieux *n'ont d'autre choix* que d'y répondre selon la règle.

celle qui était en conformité avec les prescriptions »²². Le sacrifice agissait donc « de façon magique ou automatique »²³, et n'était considéré efficace que s'il rapportait des résultats. Il avait « tous les caractères d'une opération magique, indépendante des divinités, efficace par sa seule énergie et susceptible de produire le mal comme le bien », et ne se distinguait de la magie que par son caractère régulier et obligatoire²⁴. Le sacrifice védique, à première vue, semble donc se suffire à lui-même, se concentrer autour du rituel et de l'approbation du public plutôt qu'autour des divinités. Il serait toutefois risqué de dissocier les dieux du sacrifice védique, comme il serait incorrect d'avancer qu'ils étaient les seuls destinataires de ce sacrifice ; du moins, bien que les dieux (et les ancêtres) étaient les destinataires privilégiés, ce rituel, en plus d'assurer le maintien du cosmos, avait plutôt pour fonction générale de « tisser des liens sacrés entre les êtres »²⁵ en établissant une communication avec toute forme vivante, avec l'Énergie créatrice, entre les mortels.

Valeri ne voyait pas la violence comme étant inhérente au sacrifice, et rejetait conséquemment les théories de Girard et de Burkert avec véhémence²⁶. Pourtant, bien que ces théories ne semblent pas s'appliquer au sacrifice védique, il semble que la dénégation de toute violence soit centrale à ce rituel. Comme l'indique Charles Malamoud, « la violence sacrificielle [...] n'est pas vraiment une violence, la mort infligée n'est pas vraiment

²² Saindon, « Rituel funéraire hindou », 31.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Sylvain Lévi. 2003. *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brāhmanas*. Turnhout : Brepols, 129.

²⁵ Madeleine Biardeau et Charles Malamoud. 1976. *Le sacrifice dans l'Inde ancienne*. Paris : PUF, 20.

²⁶ Girard avançait l'idée que la violence était inhérente à tout acte et ce, dû au désir mimétique, où l'individu désirait ce que l'autre désirait lui-même. Afin de maintenir l'ordre dans le groupe, la communauté choisissait donc un bouc émissaire dans lequel elle concentrait cette violence à travers le sacrifice. Burkert, quant à lui, voyait l'origine de la religion dans la chasse : le sacrifice, remémorant la « chasse parfaite », permettait ainsi de concentrer cette violence primitive en un acte cathartique pour la communauté. Voir Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, éd. 1987. *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*. Stanford : Stanford University Press.

une mort et ceux qui l'infligent ne sont pas des meurtriers »²⁷. Le sacrifice constituait pourtant en soi un acte de violence, où la destruction de l'offrande, animale comme végétale, était nécessaire ; ce contact avec la mort était dès lors signe de danger et d'impureté²⁸. C'est pourquoi, afin de limiter les dégâts de ce meurtre (dont on niait la nature), on procédait à de nombreuses techniques rhétoriques et symboliques.

D'abord, le sacrifiant s'assurait de minimiser sa responsabilité face à la violence à l'intérieur du sacrifice en laissant les officiants s'occuper du rituel ; bien que seuls ces derniers avaient les connaissances nécessaires afin de réaliser adéquatement le sacrifice, le sacrifiant s'éloignait tout de même de cette violence en déléguant les tâches. Aussi, en rendant la victime consentante à sa mise à mort et en l'étouffant à l'extérieur du cercle sacrificiel, on veillait soigneusement à contrôler cette violence et à ne pas en être souillé²⁹. En effet, on attachait la bête promise au sacrifice au poteau sacrificiel (*sthānu*), située à la limite du terrain liturgique et du monde extérieur, pour ensuite l'amener à l'extérieur de l'enceinte sacrée avant de la mettre à mort. Aussi, le bourreau limitait les signes de violence sur le corps à une toute petite partie, et ce en mettant l'animal à mort par suffocation ou strangulation grâce à un lacet ; ceci restreignait l'ampleur de la violence sur l'animal, qui devait se limiter aux dimensions d'un grain d'orge³⁰. Or, cette violente besogne de mise à mort n'était pas exécutée par le *brahman*, ni par le sacrifiant ou les autres officiants, mais bien par le bourreau (*śamītr*, c'est-à-dire « apaiseur »), de qui on ne sait pas grand-chose. C'est lui qui apaisait la victime et obtenait son consentement³¹ (et celui de ses proches) avant sa mise à mort.

²⁷ Malamoud, *Féminité de la parole*, 242.

²⁸ J. Scheuer. 1981. « Sacrifice. Rudra-Siva et la destruction du sacrifice », dans *Dictionnaire des mythologies et des religions des sociétés traditionnelles et du monde antique (Volume 2 – K à Z)*, dir. Yves Bonnefoy. Paris : Flammarion, 417.

²⁹ Voir Saindon, « Rituel funéraire hindou ».

³⁰ Scheuer, « Sacrifice », 417.

³¹ Tel était également le cas chez les Grecs, où l'animal devait se rendre de son propre gré vers l'autel afin d'être sacrifié ; cf. Marcel Detienne et Jean-Pierre Vernant. 1979. *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*. Paris : Gallimard, 18.

Du moins, il s'assurait que l'animal ne gémisses pas lors de son exécution³². Nous ne savons pas si le bourreau était lui-même un prêtre ; il serait probable qu'il appartienne plutôt à une tranche de la société moins prestigieuse, étant donné son rôle promouvant la violence et la souillure. Nous pourrions le comparer aux intouchables (*parias*) de l'Inde postvédique, à qui incombent les pire travaux et tout ce qui a trait à l'impureté (la manipulation des morts, par exemple). Cette hypothèse peut être soutenue par le fait que chez les dieux cette tâche imposée au bourreau était exécutée par Rudra, un dieu chasseur vivant en marge du monde, dans les bois, sorte d'intrus, d'exilé.

La victime offerte, qui était le summum de la pureté, ne pouvait donc en aucun cas être souillée par le sang impur³³. On disait par ailleurs que toute victime du sacrifice, végétale ou animale, accéderait par cette mort à un plus haut statut lors de sa prochaine naissance³⁴ ; c'était là un argument afin d'obtenir son consentement à sa mise à mort et sa passivité lors du sacrifice. Ce consentement était particulièrement important, car ainsi, l'animal signifiait qu'il connaissait sa place et son rôle dans l'univers et qu'il accomplissait son devoir (*dharma*), maintenant par là l'ordre du cosmos. Puis, lorsque l'animal était tué en-dehors de l'aire sacrée, le sacrifiant et les officiants fixaient le feu sacrificiel destiné à l'oblation afin d'éviter de voir la bête mourir. Par une série de gestes rituels, le bourreau et l'épouse du sacrifiant, évitant de faire mal à la victime, ne « tuaient » pas l'animal, mais l'envoyaient « vivant » (c'est-à-dire avec un corps réunifié) vers les dieux et le paradis³⁵. Ainsi, notons que le sacrifiant et son épouse participaient activement à la violence du sacrifice, en reproduisant la création et la déconstruction, la vie et la mort rattachés au cycle du cosmos, tel que démontré par le mythe relatif à Prajāpati.

Ce court essai nous a démontré que le modèle du sacrifice dans l'Inde ancienne, tout d'abord exploré par Hubert et Mauss, a su être surpassé par la théorie du sacrifice élaborée par Valerio Valeri, qui s'était intéressé au sacrifice chez les

³² Scheuer, « Sacrifice », 417.

³³ Biardeau et Malamoud, « Le sacrifice dans l'hindouisme », 147.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁵ Voir Malamoud, *Féminité de la parole*, 241-60.

Hawaïens. Ainsi, par la transposition de ce modèle à celui déjà élaboré en grande partie par Hubert et Mauss, nous avons pu complexifier cette théorie du sacrifice védique en détaillant, notamment, le rôle du public lors du sacrifice, qui désignait alors si le rituel avait été bien performé et donc, si ses effets seraient bénéfiques ou non. Toutefois, Valeri ne s'attardant pas à la notion de violence dans le sacrifice hawaïen, nous avons pris la liberté d'élaborer une explication symbolique de cette violence à l'intérieur du sacrifice védique. Nous avons conséquemment constaté que le sacrifice védique semblait, malgré les apparences, constituer une façon détournée d'accomplir un acte de non-violence (*āhimsā*). En effet, « le sacrifice rend 'non violent' ce qui serait 'violence' en dehors de lui et purifie de toute la 'violence' que doit commettre le [sacrifiant] dans sa vie quotidienne »³⁶. Cette idée d'*āhimsā* continuera ainsi à se développer pour donner naissance, plus tard, à l'hindouisme upanishadique et classique, au bouddhisme et au jaïnisme.

Ceci dit, le sacrifice védique avait d'abord et avant tout pour mission de recréer la naissance et le démembrement de Prajāpati, et donc, la création et l'ordre du cosmos. Ce cycle cosmique était inévitablement souillé de violence, car de la mort naît la vie, et vice-versa ; la destruction, que ce soit par la bouche d'Agni, le feu, ou par la mise à mort de l'animal sacrificiel, était nécessaire afin d'accéder à la création (et au remembrement symbolique de Prajāpati). Le sacrifice védique, célébration de la vie terrestre et de l'ordre du cosmos, ne faisait donc que recréer ce cycle de violence inhérent à l'univers ; violence qui, malgré tout, semblait être niée par les participants au sacrifice. Aussi, peut-être le sacrifiant espérait-il, l'espace d'un instant, pouvoir quitter cette violence afin de se rapprocher des dieux, et avoir ne serait-ce qu'un goût d'éternité et un soupçon d'immortalité.

³⁶ Biardeau et Malamoud, « Le sacrifice dans l'hindouisme », 54.

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AIDS and Sacrifice: A Discussion of René Girard's Scapegoat Theory of Sacrifice, Jean-Luc Nancy's Unsacrificeable, and Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer

Andrew Pump

Abstract: This paper seeks to build upon René Girard's scapegoat theory of sacrifice and group cohesion by considering post modern theories of sacrifice and society. It will explore the difficulty in applying a discourse of sacrifice when discussing contemporary political issues, or politically charged issues effecting minorities. By critically examining these theorists, I hope to distinguish between a religious theory of sacrifice and a modern theory explaining the relation of the 'post-political' subject to society and the state.

Introduction

The AIDS crisis is a global force, affecting people and communities worldwide. The historical trajectory of the AIDS crisis, specifically within the gay community of North America, has taken strange turns, hugely affecting peoples' lives and their understanding of the virus. Metaphors describing the virus have shifted to produce social fear and political action (defensive and offensive); these metaphors generate meaning used to target and exclude certain social groups. In René Girard's scapegoat theory of sacrifice we see how outbursts of mob violence on targeted individuals maintains and strengthens community solidarity while relieving social pressures. This essay uses Girard's theory as a starting point, eventually relating his scapegoat theory with other works also theorizing on matters of fluidity, danger, pollution, and abjection. Certain theories are contradictory to Girard's work, while others are complimentary; in both cases, they strengthen his theory by challenging it and adding to its breadth of possibilities. Subsequently, this essay will analyze Judith Butler's concept of the socially unintelligible and unmournable as it relates to AIDS and scapegoating in order to emphasize the political dimension of Girard's theory.

The second half of the essay will focus on Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the unsacrificeable to consider the problems associated in applying Girard's theory to the modern west. In Nancy's work, sacrifice itself is sacrificed with the construction of the modern west: there is no remedy for traditional sacrifice. Although the psychosocial act of scapegoating exists within the historical trajectory of the North American AIDS crisis, it does not translate into the traditional understanding of sacrifice. Traditionally, sacrifice existed on a very different plain from what we observe today in North American society; human and animal rights, civil rights, and increased ethical awareness act as today's stabilizers. In more literal terms, if we were to imagine performing a traditional sacrifice in today's context, we would observe the eventual sacrifice of anyone belonging to minority or "misfit" social groups, such as individuals suffering from AIDS, and the final justification of the sacrifice would be that it maintains social cohesion. This, of course, is anathema. The idea of sacrifice in the west has been eradicated with the machinery of Auschwitz (the mass production of the mass grave), and the millions of deaths caused by AIDS. Both the scale and the ethical dimensions of these deaths have altered the concept and application of sacrifice, especially in the west.

The final section of the essay is a discussion of Giorgio Agamben's use of the roman category of *homo sacer* to understand the modern post-political subject. It will also examine Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim* (2002), and Slavoj Zizek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), as they build upon Agamben's *homo sacer*. For Butler, the purpose of understanding the modern post-political subject is to renegotiate the boundaries of social intelligibility and avoid the exclusion or relegation of any individual to the status of *homo sacer* versus citizen. In contrast, Zizek stresses that all people in the post-political era are *homo sacer*, and the category of "state citizen" acts to conceal the new commonality of *homo sacer*. This helps distinguish a particular social complexity of AIDS: theories of scapegoating and mob violence exist in the same space as aid and charity. For example, Zizek understands *homo sacer* as someone who is all at once pitied, in need of charity (e.g. refugees, the homeless), and a victim of state violence (e.g. economic policies, war). Thus, it becomes clear that when applying Girard's scapegoat theory to Nancy's unsacrificeable and Agamben's *homo sacer*, the psychosocial scapegoat theory of sacrifice in the modern west is

no longer a theory of sacrifice; it is a secular theory of group cohesion and exclusion.

The Scapegoat, Pollution, and the Ungrievable

Girard is confident his scapegoat theory is an account of the origin of religion. In a lecture he conducted on scapegoating in the ancient city of Catalhoyuk – the oldest and largest Neolithic city found to date – Girard presented wall paintings depicting a number of hunting scenes. These paintings proved for Girard that animal sacrifice, as a means to restoring balance within the community, existed as far back as 8000 years when Catalhoyuk still stood. The mob was illustrated with various injuries not necessarily related to the hunt, though most likely symbolizing conflict within the society. They engaged in crowding tactics to overwhelm the animal as their small obsidian daggers worked best at close range (long range weapons did not exist at the time). In the act of the hunt, any violence or tension existing within the community shifted to the animal (Girard 2009). In addition, the sheer size of the animal illustrated within the paintings reflects another point made in *Violent Origins*: the scapegoat is perceived as powerful, and as the victimizer of the community (Girard 1987, 91). A role reversal ensues where the justification of the mob murder authorizes the assault: the logic of the mob is “the logic of nonconscious scapegoating in its most brutal form” (Girard 1987, 85). The selection of the scapegoat is seemingly without reason, random, “nonconscious”. For example, when minorities are targeted as the cause of outbreaks of contagious disease (if social order and cohesion are threatened) the mob will kill, fully believing their target is a real threat (the manifestation of the scapegoat is nonconscious), and after-the-fact they will feel confident they acted justly in averting real danger:

The truth is that there never was a righteous community justly mobilized against a dangerous enemy; rather, there was an outbreak of food poisoning, perhaps, or some epidemic, or a panic caused by something else, or by nothing at all, which dissolved the community into a crazy mob. Then, like all mobs, this one turned to violence: the people picked the first available victim, the

likeliest scapegoat, the visiting stranger, but they never found out what really caused their violence; they believed in their own story too much (Girard 1987, 98).

The victim is then given a place in myth, either as a founder or an innovator, and is described as offering something sacred or novel. The victim is vindicated as much as the narrative allows the mob to emerge with a good reputation.

When compared to Susan Sontag's work, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, we observe the metaphor of AIDS as a "plague" inextricably linked to outsiders or foreigners. AIDS in America is linked to Africa, "the dark continent". In the East (the former Soviet Union and Africa) the "conspiracy theory" of the disease as being produced in a CIA lab in Maryland, U.S.A., remains one of the main origin stories of AIDS (Sontag 1989, 139-141). "[Plague]" is the principle metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood. And because of AIDS, the popular misidentification of cancer as an epidemic, even a plague, seems to be receding [written in 1989]: AIDS has banalized cancer" (Sontag 1989, 132). In North America, homosexuals are the main group blamed for the origin of the disease (first known or recorded international cases were homosexuals). Even though it is less common to talk about AIDS phobia today, it is not difficult to remember the link between homophobia and the fear of AIDS throughout the 1980's and 1990's.

In relating this part of the discussion to Girard's theory, we seem to encounter the "chicken or the egg" dilemma. What came first: homophobic exclusion or AIDS panic? Although this question is unanswerable, not to mention a distraction from the more important points, it does reflect the vast confusion underlying the AIDS crisis. In effect, AIDS panic increased homophobic exclusion and violence, while also shining the public spotlight on the gay subculture. With respect to the fear of disease and infection, Girard makes an interesting point: the question should not be whether there was an *original* plague or disease. There is a different kind of scapegoating at play here, one lacking random nonconscious outbursts. Girard writes about another kind of quest to find scapegoats: "A community that actively seeks and finds scapegoats is usually a community troubled by dissension or by some real or imaginary disaster" (Girard 1987, 103). The complexities of modern society force us to use this alternative method of scapegoating where we

seek to displace fears and tensions stemming from social problems onto specific victims.

In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz writes about the body, and more specifically she writes about bodily fluids and contamination. As Sontag argues, AIDS has a dual metaphor of invasion and contamination (Sontag 1989, 105). Grosz uses the Mary Douglas' concept of 'dirt' in *Purity and Danger*, Julia Kristeva's 'abject' outlined in *Powers and Horrors*, and Jean-Paul Sartre's 'viscous' in *Being and Nothingness*. For Douglas, dirt is matter out of place, destabilizing normative boundaries and acting to "befuddle order". Similar to Douglas' ideas of disrupting order, Kristeva theorizes three categories of abjection: abjection to food (the fear of bodily incorporation), abjection to waste (manifested in fear of death and the corpse), and abjection to signs of sexual difference (Grosz 1994, 192). Fluids are important for understanding contagion: "fluids attest to the permeability of the body": a kind of fear that the body will collapse into this other body (Grosz 1994, 193). Fluids blur the corporeal mapping of how we symbolically understand or construct our bodies (the imaginary limit of where our bodies begin and end). As for Sartre, the viscous represents a middle ground between solid and liquid (e.g.: a child who dips his hand in honey); it is sticky, gross, and difficult to clean off. According to Douglas, the viscous represents the *vagina dentata* (the horror of the feminine), or, as Sartre has said, it represents an overly possessive dog or mistress.

Seminal fluid does not contain the same sense of contagion or symbolic abjection associated with the viscous (female fluids: menstrual blood). In the public discourse on AIDS, this notion is especially relevant to anal sex; the blood from the penetrated anus represents more of a threat than the seminal fluids of the penetrator. The bodily fluids of men are not considered contaminating in the same manner as the bodily fluids of women. For example, education and AIDS issues have taught women to take on more responsibility in safe sex practices, as it is usually framed as a woman's health issue. According to Grosz, even though AIDS is traced throughout the gay community, from bisexuals to heterosexuals, "[men] seem to refuse to believe that their body fluids are the contaminants" (Grosz 1994, 197). And yet, paradoxically, the cleanliness of a woman is judged by the amount of men she has been in contact with – she is treated as a sort of sponge or

“conduit of other men’s dirt” (Grosz 1994, 197). Part of the problem lies in men fearing those aspects of sexuality dealing with feminine fluids, as well as their fear of being associated with fluidity. According to Grosz, this dilemma can be re-worked by understanding certain sexual practices of gay men (though, she is not stating gay sexuality is the ultimate paradigm, as exploitative and violent forms of gay sexuality also exist). Nonetheless, certain gay male practices construct a “conduit of flows”, which does not seek to cast off masculinity “as the transsexual does”, rather, it attempts to affirm it (Grosz 1994, 198). In referring to Douglas’ concept of dirt, one can observe the quick, almost panic-like act, of men washing and separating from the female body after intercourse. This could potentially represent the need to regain control as the separation of fluidity with male pleasure alienates men from their sexuality, replacing it with a type of sexual deviance: anonymous sex, violent sex, penis as a weapon (weapons constructed like penises) and violent sexual acts against children (Grosz 1994, 199). Grosz argues men must take “responsibility for and pleasure in” their bodily fluids, and accept the sexual specificity and limit of their bodies (Grosz 1994, 202). This is even more apparent in the debate to criminalize the non-disclosure of HIV/AIDS, as in the famous case out of Vancouver sparking the debate over criminalization in Canada. Two men who were the “tops” sought to charge the man who “bottomed” for not disclosing, even though protection was used and neither of the men contracted the disease. In closing, Grosz postulates that women (or the feminine) are considered the dangerous foreigners threatening the male body with contagion. As Sontag notes, “a polluting person is always wrong, as [Mary] Douglas has observed [but] the inverse is also true: a person judged to be wrong is regarded as, at least potentially, a source of pollution” (Sontag 1989, 136).

We can detect an important social problem when relating these theories to Girard’s theory on scapegoating: in many social systems sexuality is equated with deviance and considered a threat to social cohesion. When we consider theories on fluidity and female sexuality, as well as homosexuality, it would seem the easiest targets for scapegoating are women and gay men, as both groups wander outside the normative boundaries of a fiercely heterosexual male-centered social system. In referring to Sontag and the AIDS crisis, we observe sexuality emerging as the new “disease-spronged register of fear in which everyone

now lives” (Sontag 1989, 161). Traditional American morals are reinforced as these “deviant” populations of “threatening” sexualities are targeted as polluting and diseased. Thus, the mob murder is represented as indifference to the massive loss of lives from AIDS – the murder is indirect, or of the “third degree” – as people are often ignorant and fearful of what they do not understand, choosing instead to distance themselves from the issue and from those affected by AIDS. On numerous occasions, Larry Kramer, famous AIDS activist and founder of the very first AIDS organization, The Gay Man’s Health Crisis, stated that during the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic, President Ronald Regan’s “seven years of silence” helped create (or created) the AIDS crisis, as well as the misunderstanding and indifference that ensued:

It should therefore come as no surprise that when HIV came along they, this cabal, facilitated its rapid deployment and continues to do so. Before even making the feeblest attempt to commence any miniscule response or inquiry into what their press was not reporting, which they most certainly knew about themselves, they waited till masses of us had already been exposed to the whatever it was [sic]. We, on the other hand, chose to not believe that the whatever it was was a virus until this was incontestably proved [sic]. But they knew what it was, or were willing to take the chance and hope that it was, and they just sat back and waited. Their wildest dreams then started to come true. The faggots were disappearing and they were doing it to themselves! (Kramer 2005, 66).

We can conceive of the “dark event” (Girard defines it as the event of the collective murder) as the social inaction justified by traditional American morals and values, and the maintaining of the status quo. We can extend this argument to Judith Butler’s theory on the socially unintelligible and the ungrieveable, representing Butler’s earlier work on gender and queer theory (which bodies are socially intelligible and recognizable in relation to established conceptions of gender binaries), and her more recent work on war and violence (when is a life grieveable?), both of which we will consider at a later point.

Girard claims the collectively murdered victim is one who teaches a new art or technique to the community “or is somehow responsible for this innovation” (Girard 1987, 120). This can be applied to the new, more inclusive, concepts of gender and sexuality advocated by the gay community which, in their early beginnings, experienced a great deal of violence and animosity (with respect to AIDS and gay rights) from those “defending” convention. However, in the last few decades we have witnessed, and continue to witness, the emergence of a new status quo or understanding of human sexuality: “in all these instances, some great good befalls the culture as a result of some unanimous violence against someone viewed as the benefactor as well as the original malefactor” (Girard 1987, 120). Thus, a new understanding emerges within society as gay lifestyle alternatives are acknowledged, and eventually legitimized, as a normal part of society. This “journey” of something once ostracized becoming legitimized places AIDS within the modern sacrificial arena: AIDS becomes a sacrifice for greater freedom where the noble suffering of AIDS victims makes them martyrs for the cause. We will consider the problems with this particular outlook at a later point when we examine the work of Jean-Luc Nancy.

Understanding AIDS as a sacrifice for greater freedom is a rather recent secular myth representing the founding of modern freedoms; however, it does not easily translate into Girard’s theory. As Butler notes in *Precarious Life*, the socially unintelligible is also the unmournable. The names of those who die are unprintable. The obituary acts as a key component in nation-building. Those included within the obituaries become the primary signifiers of what counts as a valid life: “it is not just that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unmarkable” (Butler 2004, 35). Publicizing the names of individuals who died of AIDS, or individuals murdered because of their sexual orientation, is usually avoided within traditional American media due to the general public and mainstream media feeling distressed by the “awkward” or “offensive” circumstances surrounding the deaths: “What might be “offensive” about the public avowal of sorrow and loss, such that memorials would function as offensive speech?” (Butler 2004, 35). Around the time of Mathew Sheppard’s death, public discourse was unable to process the significance of the event. Certain subcultural media networks managed to inform the gay community about

Matthew Sheppard's murder; however, it was not until over a decade later, with the passing of the "Matthew Sheppard Act" in the United States hate crime legislation that his name would enter into public discourse. Thus, the collective murder is eventually memorialized within myth, or becomes its own myth. With respect to those who died of AIDS, various progressive acts of remembering occur, for instance the AIDS quilt project raises awareness, compassion, and understanding for AIDS victims and their families, making it a normative national act of emblematic memory. In this manner, the AIDS panic and its related homophobia of the 1980's and 1990's is absorbed and transformed into a new national historical narrative.

Modernity, Christianity, and the Unsacrificeable

Thus far, we have examined scapegoating as a psychosocial process caused by fear of social disorder and bodily contamination. For Girard, its origins stem from mob violence in primitive society; mob violence placated social tensions and maintained order. Girard argues the origin of religion lies in this recurring event. Furthermore, this event represents a theory for sacrifice as the first form of religious (ritual) practice.

Girard's theory postulates the behaviour of people in early communities and their establishment of religion and myth. Although, his theory does not easily translate within the modern western world, nor does it coincide with the view of scapegoating prevalent throughout this essay. In the west, scapegoating must reconcile with modern secular mythical constructions, which deviate from the context of scapegoating in Girard's theory. In order to explain this deviation, we will examine the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, particularly his notion of the Unsacrificeable. Nancy argues sacrifice is an impossibility in the modern west, as the west was created out of "giving up" or "letting go" of sacrificial practices (Christ being the ultimate and final sacrifice). The complex layers that have shaped and defined the AIDS crisis are applied to Nancy's theory of the Unsacrificeable, as well as to Avital Ronell's ideas on the treatment of illness, suffering, and sacrifice in the west as it relates to the suffering of Christ.

For both Nancy and Girard, the sacrifices of both Socrates and Christ marked the sacrificing of sacrifice itself in

the west. The onto-theology essentially replaces sacrifice, yet it also points to the transformation of sacrifice – a metamorphosis – as sacrifice remains an underlying system within the theology of the crucifixion and the drinking of hemlock, though it transforms into a new reproduction (mimesis). It is not simply an evolution of sacrifice, it is a mimetic rupture: “the mimetic rupture of Western sacrifice (or, if you prefer *to* Western sacrifice...) suggests a *new* sacrifice, one distinguished by a number of characteristics” (Nancy 2003, 55). This rupture, or breakthrough from previous understandings, creates new characteristics to define sacrifice in the west. First, it is always self-sacrifice (as seen in both Socrates and Christ’s willingness to participate in their own deaths); second, it is done for all (seen as a universal act); third, sacrifice is the essence of all sacrifice (the virtue of its uniqueness is what elevates it to the very essence of sacrifice); and finally, “the truth of sacrifice *sublates*, along with “the flesh that perishes”, the sacrificial moment of sacrifice itself. And this is precisely why Western sacrifice is basically an overcoming of sacrifice, its dialectical and infinite overcoming” (Nancy 2003, 58). Within the context of the religious traditions of onto-theology, sacrifice only exists in its figurative form; it is related to the figures of Christ and Socrates. To consider sacrifice as anything else would be to justify or condone random acts of violence (e.g.: the debate between the use of ‘The Holocaust’ or ‘The Shoah’).

In examining sacrifice as it relates to the Holocaust, Nancy detects the self-sacrificing principle within the Nazi agenda in creating the Aryan vs. Jew sentiment. In Nazi Germany, the Aryan was depicted as self-sacrificing – the one willing to die for his race; “he is thus not merely one who sacrifices himself but is, in essence, sacrifice *itself*, sacrifice *as such*” (Nancy 2003, 70). In this sense, there is nothing to be sacrificed “he has only to eliminate what is not himself, what is not living sacrifice” by *acting* on behalf of Nazi ideology. Jews, on the other hand, were depicted as shamelessly self-preserving, not worthy of sacrifice as there was nothing to appropriate from them. Yet, what happened to the Jews was a sacrifice. It was also an uncontrolled act of violence that cannot be commemorated: “this is a glorious page of our history, never written and never to be written” (Himmler quoted in Nancy 2003, 70). It is a sacrifice that must also sacrifice any memorial; for the victims it is the most intolerable, while for the executioners “it is a matter of the

most silent, inner sacrifice” (Nancy 2003, 70). This shift describes the transformation of sacrifice in the west. For Nancy, it is the second rupture because it represents “the eclipse” of western sacrifice, that is, it represents an interruption of sacrifice: “in place of immolation there is no more immolation” (Nancy 2003, 71).

What the camps represent, then, is the sham of modern sacrifice; the “age of technology” is precisely the age when sacrifice ends:

‘... immolation, slaughter...’ We can no longer distinguish between them. Immolation has itself been put to death. ‘Godless,’ ‘sham’ sacrifice has forfeited all right and all dignity. Transgression transappropriates nothing. Or, rather, appropriating nothing more than the this: the victim as cadaver, the expanse of the mass grave, and the other (for whom the name of ‘executioner’ is hardly fitting) as a pure instrument in the mass production of the mass grave. As such the decomposition of sacrifice not only proves to be entirely possible thanks to technological means, but also declares itself an exemplary, hideously exemplary, figure of technology. This doesn’t necessarily involve a condemnation of the ‘technology.’ Quite the opposite. What is *hideously* exemplary here (that is, if I can put it this way, hideous in exemplary fashion) is that ‘technology’ is presented as the operation of a kind of sacrifice, or of the last secret of sacrifice, even though sacrifice decomposed within it (Nancy 2003, 72).

Nancy stresses that the economy of sacrifice has died in the west. It has “decomposed” along with the ending of the sacrificial operation itself, and was transformed by the technological apparatus of the “mass production of the mass grave” in the camps. Nothing is sacrificed in the process of sacrifice; existence – the essence of life – can either be destroyed or shared: “it will fall to us to say there is no “true” sacrifice, that real existence is unsacrificeable, that the truth of existence is to *be* unsacrificeable” (Nancy 2003, 77). This notion of “sacrificed to nothing” also relates to the AIDS quilt and the issue of emblematic memory. Dying of AIDS is a horribly painful thing (a social death that precedes the actual onslaught of physical

symptoms). Attempting to create social meaning through a concept of sacrifice demonstrates a total disregard for the complex and sensitive nature of AIDS issues, especially if one considers the tumultuous history of the AIDS crisis, and in many cases, society's deliberate alienation of AIDS victims. When AIDS education and charities spread the message: "they died so we don't have to", one can only be reminded of those who suffered, and continue to suffer, in large part from the lack of support for, and understanding of, AIDS in North America.

Avital Ronell's treatment of the ill and sick body is also applicable to what we know and say both about AIDS and modern sacrifice in the west. There are limits to the body, especially a body affected by illness; illness can limit our definition of ourselves and what we believe we can become. Illness can also be an unbelievably real traumatic experience: the "its-not-happening experience" *is* reality (Ronell 2002, 191). Ronell considers the experience of the body as a type of epistemological reference *without* meaning. More specifically, we are unaware of our bodies except under the piercing encounters of pain and mortification, or throughout the sensations of our youth. We become aware of our bodies only when under extreme instances of pleasure and pain (*jouissance*).

But is there an object to the revelations provoked by illness, is anything learned or understood. Or is not illness the stealth master, the teacher whose lessons are unremittingly vague yet purposeful ... Your body, localized to its place of pathology, reminds you of how it used to make itself invisible, a point or pulsation in the unconscious. When it was on your side, it carried you by leaving itself behind. Maybe you had cut your finger or banged your knee. A spider bite. Little things that would signal, as if by metonymy 'Honey! I'm Home! I'm your home.' Now your body prevails in a reproachful sort of way. And there is nothing for you to know (There are charts and medical histories, comparative analyses, information and data, prognosis and projections, all cognitive stammers in the face of illness). You understand yourself as dead meat, repeating the ancient cry of abandonment and knowing that this time, this time it's for real, you have been forsaken. Forget about getting past this (Ronell 2002, 181).

If pain provides a revelatory encounter with the body and the body simply *is* and *knows* without us being aware of what it *is* and what it *knows* (an experience that cannot be translated or interpreted without the use of metaphor: “it feels as though my head were splitting open”), then pain also exists “unjustifiably”. According to Ronell and Nancy, the “historicity of the wound” and “blood making sense” is a western Christian inheritance operating in our cultural imagination (Ronell 2002, 189). This is not to say other religions and cultures do not have theories that create meaning out of pain, but in western discourse this meaning-making always assumes a Christian element. Yet, “pain abhors meaning”, therefore, pain cannot be described; furthermore, this experience of the body cannot be transferred: “one can only bear witness and offer testimony” (Ronell 2002, 191). According to Ronell, then, it is not enough to simply consider the body an epistemological resource when forming a theory of sacrifice for AIDS; we must ask ourselves what validates and legitimizes our discourse of the body. Within Ronell’s work (influenced by Derrida’s postmodern deconstruction of texts) personal accounts and literature become the *only* tangible resource one can learn: medical accounts, though useful to doctors in the treatment of illness, cannot express the complexity of lived embodied experience. This is especially true of AIDS memoirs, which are key texts for constructing historical narratives that would otherwise be unavailable within the discourse of the general public. For example, the book, *Forbidden Passages*, is a collection of stories about AIDS in America banned throughout Canada in the 1980’s and early 1990’s due to their sexually explicit content.

Earlier I mentioned that our understanding of pain and illness is influenced by the Christian understanding of sacrifice and pain. Furthermore, the forsaken element of the ill body, which imitates “Christ in the Garden”, can relate the AIDS crisis to western sacrifice. This observation would precede Nancy’s idea of the second rupture occurring in the concentration camps, since Nancy describes the second rupture as the death of sacrifice. For Ronell, however, the inherited or remnant Christian meaning of pain continues to create the body as sacrificeable, that is, “the residue of sacrificeability is due in part to [the body retaining and persisting in making sense]”; although pain abhors meaning, the crashing down of pain on the body creates a sudden

resurgence of being: “I’m not well, I’m in trouble, [but, or] therefore I am” (Ronell 2002, 188 and 190). However, Ronell and Nancy both agree the sacrificed bodies are sacrificed to nothing, and the wound is simply a wound. Both the wound and the sacrifice were despiritualized following the rupture of the camps. We can no longer interpret the religious significance of sacrifice as pious people once did; we must now apply a reductionist ideology that locates the purpose of the sacrificial body in the political: the number (quantity) of those who died and how they can serve political purposes. In this way, to speak of those who died of AIDS (like those who died in the camps) in terms of sacrifice is inappropriate because it is a way to further political means.

Keeping in mind what we discussed so far, it is clear we cannot label the atrocities of the concentration camps, or the tragic and unjust circumstances of AIDS victims, as examples of the traditional Girardian scapegoat theory. There are key elements of Girard’s theory missing within these particular cases. For example, they are not, and were not, unconscious acts of mob violence – both groups were consciously targeted by society at large. Girard’s theory is certainly appropriate for describing the origins of sacrifice, though the complex historical underpinnings of the modern west make it impossible to say that the targeted Jews of Europe in the mid-twentieth century, or the targeted homosexuals of the 1980’s, were sacrifices performed to maintain social cohesion. This is not to say that these groups are not, and were not, considered scapegoats in the most general sense of the term. What it demonstrates is the lack of correlation between these groups and Girard’s scapegoat theory. The mass grave sites of the concentration camps and the millions of fabric panels of the AIDS quilt project represent objects bereft of trickle-down-symbolism – they represent breakthroughs ushering in possibilities of new political understandings. Of course, one could argue the religious is political. Perhaps the possibility of new political understandings also represents some new form of religious or sacrificial understanding. However, this essay does not refer to modern notions of religion and sacrifice. It refers to a very formal understanding of them. Although I do not wish to create a binary between the religious and the political, I argue that to give these events a religious (or higher) meaning lessens the hideous reality of the events themselves. There are, however, certain aspects of Girard’s theory that still apply: these events of

mass collective violence become secularly mythologized through the creation of a new political understanding. For example, following The Holocaust was the Declaration of Human Rights and the founding of the state of Israel. The effects of the AIDS crisis on the gay community created a need to educate the general public, which encouraged understanding, awareness, and the need for gay rights – these events created the political will for change. With this in mind, they do represent certain elements of Girard's theory of sacrifice. However, if we consider Nancy's theory of the historicity of sacrifice, it would be inaccurate and grossly inappropriate to apply the term sacrifice to the AIDS crisis and to the persecution of Jews during the Second World War.

Homo Sacer: Killed but not Sacrificed

Earlier we examined the works of Jean-Luc Nancy and Avital Ronell, both examining the notion of being sacrificed for nothing. Giorgio Agamben's reworking of the roman category of *homo sacer* encourages a more in depth understanding of this idea of being sacrificed for nothing. In ancient Rome, transgressing the law or erring from appropriate citizenship meant one was consigned the social status of *homo sacer* (literal meaning: sacred person), which justified their killing, though the killing was not regarded as a sacrifice. According to Agamben, the reason for this is rooted in two concepts: the rule of exclusion where the sovereign is not subject to its own laws, and Foucault's notions of biopower or biopolitics, which represents controlling life, or more accurately, controlling people through the positive production of subjectivity and discourses on life and health. In light of these concepts, Hannah Arendt's description of the concentration camps comes to symbolize the way citizenship was stripped from Jews. In the same manner, Agamben notes the fear of being labelled as *der Musselmann* (the Muslim). According to Arendt, the emergence of the totalitarian state can at any point strip citizenship from individuals; the stripping of citizenship represents a negative prohibition against characters and actions in totalitarianism. Agamben takes this one step further with Foucault's notion of biopolitics. With respect to the positive production of subjects and biopower (characteristic of democracy), Agamben argues

that all citizens are now relegated to the status of *homo sacer*, thus losing the status of citizen, and becoming the non-citizen whose killing can be justified. Agamben defines the sacred person as someone who can be killed but not sacrificed – a paradox operating in the view that people reduced to mere biological life have no political significance (characteristic of the post-political world).

In her book, *Antigone's Claim*, Judith Butler argues we must expand the notion of citizen by broadening what is socially intelligible, that is, renegotiating the limits of social intelligibility to encompass those relegated to the status of *homo sacer*. However, in his book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek claims this is impossible as Agamben argues everyone is relegated to the status of *homo sacer*; therefore, it is not a question of who is, and who is not, a citizen. Citizenship is the secondary characteristic of biopower that comes to cover the new universal commonality of all human life as *homo sacer*:

What if the true problem is not the fragile status of the excluded but, rather, the fact that, on the most elementary level, we are *all* 'excluded' in the sense that our most elementary, 'zero' position is that of an object of biopolitics, and that possible political and citizenship rights are given to us as a secondary gesture, in accordance with biopolitical strategic considerations? (Žižek 2002, 95).

The post-political represents the closing together of the political subject and the mere biological person so there is no longer the possibility of political action where the liberal democratic project represents the Hegelian "end of history" (as proposed by Francis Fukuyama after the fall of the Berlin Wall).

The significance of this concept as it relates to AIDS is that medical discourses on health and life (which represent key themes of biopolitical control) function to stave off subversive life alternatives. In this sense, the famous historical gay statement "before the AIDS crisis no self respecting gay man would practice monogamy" perfectly reflects the nature of biopolitics. If we examine this through Hegelian dialectics, the *thesis* of heterosexual monogamy is challenged by the *antithesis* of gay sexual subculture, and sublates into the *synthesis* of gay marriage. The radical nature of the antithesis is sublated into the

synthesis, yet the function of biopower also serves to limit this radicalism. In *No Future*, queer theorist Lee Edelman demonstrates how the figure of the child enters into the picture to secure future policy and state legislation. He quotes sex columnist Dan Savage's recent statements on gay marriage: "gay parents are not only making a commitment to our political future, but to the future, period... and many of us have decided we want to fill our time with something more meaningful than sit-ups, circuit parties and designer drugs" (Savage quoted in Edelman 2004, 75). Sit-ups and circuit parties represent the antithesis. This antithesis is further marginalized as a legitimate life choice because of AIDS paranoia, and the reproductive norm appropriated by the new gay married couple becomes the new status quo.

The image of *homo sacer* demonstrates the ambivalent attitude of the state and populace toward the lives of all individuals, especially those belonging to the gay community. "[Perhaps] the ultimate treatment of the "local population" as *homo sacer* is that of the American war plane flying above Afghanistan – one is never sure what it will drop, bombs or food parcels" (Zizek 2002, 94). In the past few years we have seen the establishment and acknowledgment of the institution of gay marriage in Canada. We also see the effort to ban gay organ donation, and sustained laws against homosexuals donating blood. During the earlier years of the AIDS crisis in the United States, there was a total lack of concern for the lives of gay men, but by the 1990's we observed programs for free drugs and a decrease in FDA approval time for new retroviral drugs. Although these examples were only made possible through a great deal of social and political activity, the fluctuating acceptance and resistance of the state to these demands demonstrates their ambivalence towards both gay people and the general public. While new AIDS drug legislation was being passed, Bill Clinton passed the "don't ask don't tell" military policy. Meanwhile, private sector voluntarism (contemporary NGO culture) fills the growing lack of state care for its citizens. In a recent Oprah Winfrey show honouring "heroes of the financial crisis", Oprah features individuals who initiated programs within their communities to purchase foreclosed homes and offer free clinics. It was shocking and upsetting to see this display without any sort of political critique, as if to say it is not the job of private citizens to fix such problems. Such actions

(and messages) create a buffer between citizens and political activism (e.g.: professionalization of activism in the form of the NGO). According to Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, the NGO represents a recoding and re-territorialization of the United States doctrine of Manifest Destiny; the organizations help further foreign and domestic policies of the modern repressive state. The structure of the NGO and other charitable networks clean up the mess of state exclusion and violence (caused by the economic policies of the state), while in the twenty-first century the state becomes the key institution representing total unaccountability.

Conclusion

Scapegoating appears as a political process in the current secular-political context of North America, and is not the sacrificial process outlined by René Girard. It is not meant to target a random group of people in order to maintain social cohesion; instead, it limits social change by maintaining the status quo and controlling those individuals refusing (or accused of refusing) to follow convention or social norms. Jean-Luc Nancy and Avital Ronell argue that the term sacrifice cannot be used in the modern west without contradictions and inconsistencies, as we have moved away from traditional (formal) acts of sacrifice. The term is merely a figurative remnant of religion, only serving to represent certain aspects of the modern period, particularly self-sacrifice and modern appropriations of religious suffering. Furthermore, the figure of *homo sacer* represents a more nuanced and applicable term than “sacrificed scapegoat”, as the state is less an agent of redistribution and more an agent of repression in its biopolitical control of subjects.

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Snakes, Sacrifice, and Sacrality in South Asian Religion

Gabriel Jones

Abstract: Ritual sacrifice associated with snake veneration is not uniformly expressed. The snake figures prominently in the art and narrative of contemporary Saivism, Vaisnavism, Jainism, and Buddhism in addition to the myriad of popular devotional practices of rural village and peripatetic peoples of India. Drawing on the evidence within the many traditions that have accommodated or rejected the snake as a subject of veneration, this article theorizes its associated sacrifice(s) as a tripartite phenomenon reflecting divergent cultural valuation of the snake across the Indian sub-continent.

Introduction

Rituals devoted to the propitiation and supplication of the *sarpa*, as the common snake is called in Sanskrit, as well as the snake's supernatural counterpart the *Naga*, have been in evidence on the Indian sub-continent for more than two millennia¹. It has been suggested that snake veneration, within the vast corpus of fertility and ancestor cult practices² permeating the South Asian pre-historic devotional landscape³, are the ritual seeds⁴ from which medieval iconography and devotional practice evolved⁵.

¹ Laurie Cozad. 2004. *Sacred Snakes: Orthodox Images of Indian Snake Worship*, Davies Group, 2.

² A. Coomarswamy. *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, 5

³ D.M. Srinivasan. *On the Cusp of an Era: Art in the Pre-Kusana World*, 21.

⁴ A. Coomarswamy, 56-57.

⁵ *Ibid*, 43.

The snake figures are prominent within the art⁶ and narrative⁷ of contemporary Saivism, Vaisnavism, Jainism⁸ and Buddhism⁹, as well as within the many popular devotional practices of rural villages¹⁰ and nomadic peoples¹¹ throughout India. In part to the lingering colonial sentiment dogging the subject of popular religious practice, too often dismissed as primitive¹², superstitious¹³, peasant¹⁴ or folk¹⁵, serious academic examination of the impact of snake veneration on the religious landscape of India has been limited.

Building on Robert Redfield's notion that one can construct a valid characterization of pre- or proto-historic peoples through the combined efforts of archaeology and ethnography¹⁶, and Clifford Geertz's "thick description¹⁷" in the interpretation of culture, this paper looks to "thicken" the phenomena of snake sacrifice as a lived practice within distinct cultural theatres, integrated within textual and material referents of sacrifice to, and of, the snake. Furthermore, this paper looks at how the many religious meaning(s) ascribed to snakes within a sacrificial context have been [re-] interpreted and implemented in those same theatres. In taking this approach, I also set out to redirect certain assumptions persisting within South Asian scholarship, particularly from scholars engaged within orthodox

⁶ D.M. Srinivasan , 21.

⁷ Laurie Cozad, 4.

⁸ P.S. Jaini. *Collected Papers on Jaina Studies*, 273.

⁹ Robert DeCaroli. *Haunting the Buddha*, 69-70, 74.

¹⁰ Frederick J. Simoons. 1998. *Plants of Life, Plants of Death*, 82.

¹¹ M. Robertson. *Snake Charmers: The Jogi Nath Kalbelias of Rajasthan*, 7.

¹² Robert Redfield. *The Primitive World*, 3.

¹³ K. Gogri and S. Jain. 2007. personal communications, Jaipur.

¹⁴ William Crooke. *Religion and Folklore in Northern India*, 19.

¹⁵ Robert Redfield, 26; Geertz, 173.

¹⁶ Robert Redfield, 3-4.

¹⁷ Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 6.

traditions, on the nature and influence of “popular¹⁸” religious practices within more institutionalized, and thereby more visible (and more studied) traditions. Within these discourses it is implied that popular religions generally, and snake veneration specifically, are not subjects worthy of serious study¹⁹. It is my hope this paper will address this criticism by surveying the influence and essential importance of snake veneration to contemporary devotional representation and practice.

I will begin with reviewing the cultural conditions in pre- to proto-historic Indian society, which encompasses the late Indus Valley to Kusana periods (roughly 1200 BCE to 300CE) of India’s material culture history. This selection pertains directly to two major religious innovations in which snake veneration are historically implicated, and still prominently enacted. The first of these innovations was the ritual and narrative re-evaluation of the snake, long an object of fear, awe and devotional activity, which we access through textual analysis and material culture evidence. This last innovation is followed closely by a second innovation, the implementation and formalization of a devotionally anchored representational canon, which cultural art historian D.M. Srinivasan argues was a bid to “concretize religious belief into the viable forms which Pan-India could recognize and accept as being fit for worship”²⁰. To this last end, this paper juxtaposes material and narrative referents from Pre-Kusana (900 BCE to 400 BCE) and Kusana (400 BCE to 375 CE) periods²¹ alongside contemporary South Asian expressions of snake sacrifice, representing accounts from Nepal and the Western Himalayas, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Kerala.

Snake worship: archaeological and textual considerations

¹⁸ Robert DeCaroli, 18.

¹⁹ William Croke, 399.

²⁰ D.M. Srinivasan, 14.

²¹ *Ibid*, 11.

The contemporary religious traditions of India display a remarkable familiarity with snake worship²²; from *Krsna's* legendary destruction of the many headed serpent *Kaliya*²³, *Visnu* reclining against the cosmic serpent *Ananta*²⁴, the Jina Parsvanatha protected by the rajanaga *Dhanendra* and his queen *Padmavati* during his assault by the demon *Kamatha*, the Buddha likewise was protected by the serpent *Muchalinda* which earned him the moniker of *Mahanaga*²⁵, or great snake. These hagiographic referents, when considered alongside the continuing presence of devotional cults to deified naga and nagini²⁶, as autonomous, affiliated or subaltern practices, demonstrate the prominence of the sacred snake as an object of ritual and religious authority in India. As a prehistoric lived practice little is known with certainty beyond what can be inferred from the available material evidence, particularly with regards to religion in ancient pre-literate societies²⁷. Ethnoarcheological surveys of Palaeolithic sites across western and central India have unearthed a wealth of Harappan terracotta wares depicting the divine feminine²⁸ and the lingam, as well as water symbols, plants, and snakes²⁹.

The prominence of snake imagery is by no means limited to potsherds³⁰; several Harappan seals also provide

²² G. Ravindran Nair. *Snake Worship In India*, 5.

²³ John Bowker. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of World Religions*, 324 and G.R. Nair, *Snake Worship In India*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 229.

²⁵ Samuel Bercholz and Sherab Chodzin Kohn. *The Buddha and His Teachings*, 320.

²⁶ G. Ravindran Nair, 30-36.

²⁷ Bridget and Raymond Allchin. *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan*, 89.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 163.

²⁹ Richard F.S. Starr. *Indus Valley Painted Pottery*, 80-81.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

compelling evidence of prehistoric snake veneration³¹. The most commonly cited seal is the so-called proto-*Siva/Prashupati* figure crowned with what are variously interpreted as pipal leaves³² or snake(s)³³. A far less cited Harappan seal depicts kneeling devotees covered by rearing cobra-like snakes with hands raised to a yogic figure³⁴. If we accept Raymond Allchin's claim that there is a "close connection in prehistoric societies between their beliefs concerning religion and ideology, and their artistic expression³⁵", this last image provides the most compelling representation of a prehistoric snake cult in the Indus valley³⁶. Unfortunately, between these prehistoric material referents, and the earliest comparable proto-historic ones a thousand years later³⁷, there is a significant gap in the material evidence. Doris Srinivasan argues that this evidentiary gap may reflect the increased use of impermanent materials³⁸ such as wood, reed, dung, or even consumables over the stone and baked clay wares across the late Harappan (1900 BCE to 900 BCE) and early pre-Kusana periods (900 BCE-200 BCE). In the absence of direct material evidence we must instead turn to textual referents. Sadly, as no indigenous text from this period has ever been found, we must look to the early Vedic redactors for evidence of devotion to the sacred snake³⁹. The *Rg Veda* records the very earliest textual mention of snake worship in its

³¹ G. Ravindran Nair, 2.

³² Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 163.

³³ See A.L. Basham. *A Cultural History of India*, 18. See also Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 214. The one side of a triangular terracotta amulet (Md 013) depicting fishes, *gharials* and snakes. A horned person sits in *padmasana* on a throne with hooved legs. Discovered at Mohenjo-daro in 1936, collection of the Dept. of Eastern Art, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

³⁴ Ranesh Ray and Jay Van Alphen. *Tejas: 1500 Years of Indian Art*, 55.

³⁵ Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 93-94.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 214.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 229.

³⁸ D.M. Srinivasan, 21.

³⁹ Laurie Cozad, 20.

description of the world-serpent *Vrtra*⁴⁰, meaning ‘storm-cloud’, demonic opponent to the Vedic hero *Indra*.

Vritra, the *Dasyu*, literally a robber, but apparently used in contrast to *Arya*, as if intending the uncivilized tribes of India. ‘Thou, singly assailing him, although with auxiliaries at hand/ Perceiving the impending manifold destructiveness of [*Indra*’s] bow/ they, the *Sanakas* [followers of *Vritra*], the *neglecters of sacrifice*, fled.⁴¹’

The characterization of *Vrtra* as the “concealer⁴²” of the sun, the bringer of night, as an indigenous object of veneration, as well as of a culture that “neglected” to sacrifice, alludes to the dramatic axiological difference between Vedic and non-Vedic peoples. In the *Rg Veda*, *Vrtra* is cast as “the obstructor of heaven and earth⁴³”, that which prevented the celestial waters from falling. *Indra*, in striking off the head of *Vrtra*, is, from the Vedic perspective, liberating the Vedic peoples from the worldly hegemony that the indigenous worship of the celestial snake represented.

The Bhagavata and Vishnu Puranas allude to the cosmic snake *Ananta* being both the source and physical support of all creation⁴⁴. *Ananta*, meaning “endless⁴⁵” is also called *Śesa*, the serpent god, or *Adishesha*, the first snake⁴⁶. *Ananta* is described as a primal creative being in whose hoods are held all the planets of the universe⁴⁷, and whose endless coiling maintains the order

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 14-15.

⁴¹ A. Pike. Cited from H.H. Wilson translation of *Rg Veda*, 627.

⁴² *Ibid*, 627.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 629.

⁴⁴ Eugene Burnouf. *Bhagavata Purana*, vol. 35, 83.

⁴⁵ John Bowker, 527.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

⁴⁷ *Srimad Bhagavatam*, 5.25.13. <http://vedabase.net/sb/5/25/1/en1> (accessed 22 Jan 2010).

of the universe⁴⁸. The Matsya Purana tells that when “all creatures are consumed by fire at the end of the Yuga [current era], Śesa alone will remain⁴⁹”. While *Ananta* is associated with *Visnu*⁵⁰, *Vasuki* the serpent king is associated with *Siva*, depicted slung around Siva’s neck⁵¹ as a warning and a blessing. *Vasuki*, in contrast to *Ananta*, is much more involved in the worldly affairs of gods and men, and is commonly invoked in the laying of foundation of a new house to ensure the security of the household. *Ananta*, *Śesa* and *Vasuki* are understood as either elder snakes or snake kings, depending on the implicit value of each within the observing community. They are uniformly bringers of rain and fertility when appeased, or earthquakes, death, and destruction when angered. *Vrtra*, *Ananta*, *Śesa* and *Vasuki* are essentially understood as untamed, and normally untameable, supernatural agents of the cosmos in animal form. The taming of the sacred snake appears to originate in the admixture of Vedic Brahmins and indigenous tribal populations widespread across north-central India when Vedic Aryans began first migrating into the Indian sub-continent⁵² around 2200 BCE. We see this transformation of the prehistoric tradition in that snake veneration, initially tolerated in the *Samhita* Rg Veda⁵³ reflected in the ritual accommodation of the sacred snake as a locus of power⁵⁴ and stemming from an operational shift from strategies of open warfare with resident peoples⁵⁵ to those of cultural assimilation⁵⁶. As the power base weighed increasingly in favour of the Brahmin, there is a distinct change in how the

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ G. Ravindran Nair, 13.

⁵⁰ *Srimad Bhagavatam*. 5.25.1. <http://vedabase.net/sb/5/25/1/en1> (accessed 22 Jan 2010).

⁵¹ G. Ravindran Nair, 14.

⁵² Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 307.

⁵³ Laurie Cozad, 27.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 307-308.

⁵⁶ A.L. Basham, 29.

serpent is interpreted⁵⁷. The Samhitas through to the Brahmanas maintains a distinct unity in Brahmin opposition to the *dasyus*, “dark ones”, who are primary worshippers of the snake, the goddess and the lingam⁵⁸. By the time of the Aranyakas, snake worship was being openly vilified by the Brahmin elite⁵⁹, perhaps in a bid to [re]gain control over wealthy patrons at the center of the growing urban polity of north-central India. This systematic suppression lasted until the Pre-Kusana period (1000 BCE-200 BCE) of north-central India, which corresponds archaeologically with the city-based culture described in the Upanishads⁶⁰ (600-500 BCE) wherein foreign invaders from Bactria and modern day north-western Yunnan⁶¹ began asserting political control over traditionally Aryan strongholds. By the Kusana period (1st c. CE to 375 CE) in order to stabilize the newly forming empires, Kusan kings inclined themselves towards multivalent religious tolerance⁶². This freedom of worship is artistically expressed⁶³ throughout Pre-Kusana and Kusana sites around Mathura⁶⁴, the Deccan and the Gandharan region⁶⁵ particularly, which coincides with territories where Aryan and Dravidian populations were most intensely juxtaposed. Most significantly, it is in these milieus where cultic figures such as *Yakshas* and *Yakshis*⁶⁶, *Nagas* and *Naginis*⁶⁷

⁵⁷ Laurie Cozad, 52 and 69.

⁵⁸ Bridget and Raymond Allchin, 307.

⁵⁹ Laurie Cozad. *Sacred Snakes*, 51-52.

⁶⁰ Valerie Roebuck. *The Upanisads*, Xxv.

⁶¹ D.M. Srinivasan, 12.

⁶² *Ibid*, 10 and 23.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 21 and U. Singh. *Cults and Shrines in Early Historic Mathura*, 386.

⁶⁵ D.M. Srinivasan, 25.

⁶⁶ A. Coomarswamy, 29.

⁶⁷ D.M. Srinivasan, 21.

appear in increasing prominence alongside political, religious and ancestral notables⁶⁸.

Yakshas and Nagas

Yakshas and their female counterparts *Yakshinis* are inherently ambiguous figures with distinctly numinous character. Perhaps best explained as manifestations of elemental uncertainty, the *Yaksha* in a devotional context function as embodied agents of the natural and the wild; comparable perhaps to the *djinn* of Arabia or the *pari* of the trans-Himalaya⁶⁹. In India the *yaksha* is “a primeval symbol of fertility, abundance, water, and vegetation⁷⁰” frequently represented aniconically, as demonstrated by the ongoing practice of keeping sacred trees, groves⁷¹, water pools⁷² or other naturally occurring features⁷³ as incarnations of fertility or elemental sacred power. The textual tradition underscores how the popular understanding of the *Yaksha* and *Naga* has changed, from beneficial figures which were uncontested objects of devotion⁷⁴, to “terrifying, demonic creature[s]⁷⁵” that must be subjugated and subordinated to more human agents of spiritual power⁷⁶. The *Nagas*, in addition to being tutelary inhabitants of these sacred spaces⁷⁷, are understood as natural or supernatural agents of environmental

⁶⁸ U. Singh, 385.

⁶⁹ M. H. Sidke. 1994. Shamans and Mountain Spirits in Hunza. *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 53, 72-73.

⁷⁰ G. Hinich Sutherland. *The Disguises of the Demon: The Development of the Yaksha in Hinduism and Buddhism*, 1.

⁷¹ F. J. Simoons, 49.

⁷² *Ibid*, 95.

⁷³ A. Annamalai. July 2007. personal communication. Tamil temple, North Gower.

⁷⁴ U. Singh, 383.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 383.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 383.

⁷⁷ F. J. Simoons, 95.

affordance⁷⁸ by virtue of their physical, affective and numinous presence⁷⁹.

As the devotional demand to manifest⁸⁰ the *Yaksha* and *Naga* increased in new formed urban settings, they took on the familiar anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms pre-eminent throughout the late Vedic period (800 BCE-200 BCE). Significantly, *Yaksha* and *Naga* idols whether affiliated with an ancestor/hero or greater deity⁸¹ across religious traditions in ritual, narrative and art⁸², as is the case with *Nagadevatas* such as Ananta to Vishnu, or Dhanendra to Parsvanatha, continue nonetheless to be independently venerated as independent deities or as *Kshetrapala*⁸³ -- deified guardians of inhabited farmland or fields. Regardless of association the *Naga* is always thought of as *integral to the world* and *immanently accessible*, though eminently subject to whimsy and affiliatory uncertainty. This absolute otherness and moral ambiguity, intriguing to scholar and devotee alike, are what have kept the *Yaksha* and *Naga* in the collective imagination of communities for centuries as much as the essential nature of their (potential) boons of healthy crops, children⁸⁴ and good fortune.

The *Yaksha* and *Yaksha-Naga* were prehistoric subjects of worship⁸⁵, granted primacy from their power over life and death, and later through their association with fertility and

⁷⁸James Gibson (1979:129) In accordance with James Gibson's views, environmental affordance is a reciprocal relationship between a person and his or her environment whereby the environment provides resources and opportunities for the person, and the person gets information from, and acts on, the environment. As cited in *Bush Base, Forest Farm: Culture, Environment and Development*, by E.J. Croll and D.J. Parkin. Routledge, 44.

⁷⁹ William Crooke, 383.

⁸⁰ Ananda Coomarswamy. *Yaksha*, 29.

⁸¹ G. Hinich Sutherland, 1.

⁸² D.M. Srinivasan, 4.

⁸³ K. Gogri: personal correspondence, December 2009.

⁸⁴ F. J. Simoons, 95.

⁸⁵ U. Singh, 385.

health⁸⁶. That their use in ritual settings shifted from central figures in public setting, to temple settings, to small figures in predominantly domestic settings,⁸⁷ is indicative not of a decline in practice as is often stated, so much as a reflection of orthodox Brahmin sentiment regarding the indigenous traditions increasingly influencing the urban polity⁸⁸. Even then, the Yaksha and Naga were increasingly being adopted as the devotional standard from which religious figurations⁸⁹ were derived, such as with Balarama, Siva and Vishnu within Hinduism⁹⁰, as well as Parsvanatha and the Buddha within the śramanic traditions⁹¹. This representational consolidation of grass-root⁹² and elite traditions can be linked to conscious attempts on the part of the elite to assimilate or convert indigenous populations⁹³ seen as equally wild as the creatures they venerated. Politically, these “peasant” populations were an increasingly important demographic in the development of the physical and spiritual landscape⁹⁴ as consolidated fiefdoms known as *Janapadas* came into being. The period was therefore a rare time of religious equipoise⁹⁵ for Yaksha and Naga worship in the history of South Asian religions.

By the Gupta period (300 CE-600 CE) both Yaksha and Naga had become largely “displaced as major focuses of worship in the urban public domain by the deities [later] associated with

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 383.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁸⁸ Robert DeCaroli, 33.

⁸⁹ D.M. Srinivasan, 14.

⁹⁰ U. Singh, 385.

⁹¹ Ananda Coomarswamy. *Yaksha*, 29.

⁹² William Crooke, 19.

⁹³ Robert DeCaroli, 34.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ U. Singh, 387.

Puranic Hinduism⁹⁶. Today, these principally persist amongst rural, marginal or nomadic communities of the western Himalaya and Northern India, lending popular support to the notion that snake veneration is a primitive or backwards practice. In the South these practices continued well into the 12th century CE, and prospered in revitalized form throughout the medieval period (12th c. CE to 16th c. CE). Naga worship in its many forms is particularly vibrant in Gujarat⁹⁷, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala⁹⁸, Orissa, and West Bengal⁹⁹ where, coincidentally, tribal populations are most concentrated.

Nagas as paradigms of sacred immanence

India ecologically favours the proliferation of snakes, with over 120 distinct species so far catalogued on the sub-continent¹⁰⁰. Snakes, and particularly the cobra, are understood as death dealers¹⁰¹ which, in the choice ecological habitat provided by the predominantly sub-tropical and tropical climate of the Indian sub-continent, enable a diverse range of habitats. Indian snakes can be found in trees, burrowed in the earth as well as in, and around, all bodies of water¹⁰². They are functionally everywhere. It is only their inherently secretive nature¹⁰³ coupled with government subsidized snake-catching¹⁰⁴ that prevents contemporary India from being completely over-run by snakes, as undoubtedly has been the sentiment in ages past. Their

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ G. Ravindran Nair, 28.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰⁰ Indraneil Das. *Herpetology of an Antique Land*, 215.

¹⁰¹ B. Demers. 2007. *field notes*. Haridwar, India.

¹⁰² F. J. Simoons, 82.

¹⁰³ William Crooke, 383.

¹⁰⁴ B. Demers. 2007. *field notes*. Haridwar, India. See also P. Bagla. Feb. 2003. "India Snake Hunters find Antidote to Joblessness". National Geographic web article, 25: http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/02/0225_030225_Indiansnakes.html (accessed November 20th 2009).

characterization as inhabitants and symbolic guardians of the trees, in particular fig-trees¹⁰⁵, their association with the waters fed by monsoon rains¹⁰⁶, and finally their extreme prolificacy¹⁰⁷ (cobras can give birth to hundreds of young) connects the snake with fertility¹⁰⁸. It has additionally often been suggested that the regular shedding of old skin is a visual metaphor for renewal and rebirth¹⁰⁹, which, when combined with their latent ability to kill, makes the snake an obvious embodied materialization of the life cycle, and of immortality. Given the immediate danger that the snake poses, particularly to small children and to the elderly (who are most susceptible to the venom of cobras and vipers) combined with the association with fertility, it is not surprising that a central preoccupation of devotees to the Naga are propitiatory requests for progeny, health and healing illness, and snakebite¹¹⁰:

The knowledge of poisons or antidotes is one of the eight chief subjects of India medical science: 'Innumerable are the famous Lords of the Nagas (holy cobras) headed by Vasuki and beginning from Takshaka, earth bearers, resembling the sacrificial fire in their splendour (teja), who incessantly cause thunder, rain and heat and by whom this earth with her oceans, mountains and continents is supported and who in their wrath might smite the whole world with their breath and sight. Homage be to those. With those there is no need of the healing art. But of those of the poison fangs that belong to the earth and bite human beings I will enumerate the number and in the proper order.'¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ F. J. Simoons, 95.

¹⁰⁶ G. Ravindran Nair, 30.

¹⁰⁷ G. Hinich Sutherland, 38.

¹⁰⁸ F. J. Simoons, 82.

¹⁰⁹ William Crooke, 383.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 384.

¹¹¹ Miriam Robertson. 1972. Snake Charmers. Citing Sasruta (1835) in *Vogel*, Vol.17, 85

The Artharvaveda alludes that the knowledge of medicinal herbs used in healing and countering poisons rest with the snakes themselves¹¹², a power later assumed by ascetics¹¹³ as they systematically supplanted the sacred snake¹¹⁴ as accessible embodiments of sacred presence. Nonetheless, the tradition as a whole persists, in large part due to its universally accessible affect-laden ground, but also as the multiethnic *mélange* represented in the growing urban polis encouraged incorporation of old beliefs with the new. The Bhavishya Purana, for example, which is dated to this period, exhorts men to bathe the snakes called Vasuki, Takshaka, Kaliya, Manibhadra, Airavata, Dhritarashtra, Karkotaka, and Dhananjaya with milk on the fifth day of the bright fortnight of Shravan to ensure “freedom from danger for their families¹¹⁵”. These practices continue to this day, despite theological and caste-based criticism. Temples dedicated to Nagas such as the Jahar Pir Mandir in Rajasthan, dedicated to *Gugga*¹¹⁶, or the Mannarasala Temple in Kerala, offer milk, butter, turmeric, or rice powder¹¹⁷ as part of daily *pūja* to the serpent deities to this day, or, for women desiring children a bell-metal vessel is offered¹¹⁸. These offerings are explicitly understood as propitiatory gifts chosen for their capacity to please or appease the Naga. The ritual performance of a *sarpan pattu*, or serpent song, by caste specialists¹¹⁹ during major festivals and by special request by a patron, is also performed to

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Laurie Cozad, 78.

¹¹⁵ Jyotish News, August 2000, Supplemental:
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/1186579/JNAUGSUP2> (accessed 23 December, 2009).

¹¹⁶ William Crooke, 392.

¹¹⁷ G. Ravindran Nair, 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*; C. Guillebaud. 2008. *Le Chant des Serpents: Musiciens Itinérants du Kerala*, CNRS Éditions, Paris, 77.

“assuage the wrath of the snake god¹²⁰” and ensure good fortune in the coming year. This last is a distinctly south Indian elaboration on snake sacrifice, in that the song is both a propitiatory offering and a devotional gesture. Related to the *sarpam pattu* is the *Pampinthehallal*, a ritual dance dedicated to the snake gods. Ordinary rice flour mixed with lime and turmeric powder and burnt paddy husk are employed, in all shades of red, white, black and ochre¹²¹ to draw elaborately entwined snake figures on the ground. They are flanked by lamps and food offerings¹²² such as milk, butter, and turmeric or rice powder¹²³. This type of ritual drawing is known as *kalam*, and is circumambulated by devotees, accompanied by prayers and music¹²⁴.

Following the construction of the *kalam*, designated women, usually unmarried virgin women¹²⁵ of the sponsoring household, form a procession that, led by a *pujari* of high caste¹²⁶, circumambulates three times around the *kalam*, dancing and whirling in emulation of the movement of the snakes, touching the *kalam*, and their foreheads, in orchestration with the music and recitation of mantras. This ecstatic dance culminates in the recitation of prayers at the *kavu*¹²⁷ which is a “sacred spot set aside as the abode of the snake deity¹²⁸”. The most notable feature of the *Pampinthehallal* is that as part of the circumambulatory dance, the young women “chosen to represent

¹²⁰ G. Ravindran Nair, 21.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 22.

¹²² *Ibid*; C. Guillebaud, 72.

¹²³ G. Ravindran Nair, 21.

¹²⁴ C. Guillebaud, 71.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 74.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 73.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*.

¹²⁸ G. Ravindran Nair, 21-22.

the power of the serpent¹²⁹ following a period of abstinence¹³⁰ will fall into trance states, said to be possession by the deity¹³¹, and utter sounds or words believed to be the “words of the [snake] god¹³²”. At the close of the ritual, the women, still believed to be possessed by the deity, wipe the kalam completely away with “fierce brushing of their hair¹³³”.

That snakes are believed to be keepers of hidden knowledge, a reoccurring theme frequently seen in hagiographic literature and poetry, is demonstrated in these ecstatic rites by the practice of pressing the possessed women with questions, suggesting these possessions serve oracular purposes¹³⁴. This potential is not limited to any one Naga spirit; rather, the proceedings are typically dedicated to one or several of nine Nagas¹³⁵: Nagaraja (directly identified with Dhanendra¹³⁶ for Jains), Sarpa Yakshi, Naga Yakshi, Naga Chamundi, Nilavara Muthassan, Kuzhi nagam, Kari Nagam, Mani Nagam and Para Nagam, who are seen as the leaders of the otherworldly serpent realms. These are but a few of the aspects that have come to form contemporary *sarpabali*, the literal strengthening or empowering of the snake gods.

Sacrifice and the snake

If the previous accounts tell us anything, it is that sacrifice, as constituted within snake veneration, is not uniformly interpreted or applied. The antiquity and cross-cultural breadth of snake

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 22; C. Guillebaud, 74.

¹³⁰ G. Ravindran Nair, 22.

¹³¹ C. Guillebaud, 74.

¹³² G. Ravindran Nair, 22.

¹³³ “Shyama”. 2005. Comment posted September 22, 1:44pm on Performing Arts of Kerala forum: <http://www.anothersubcontinent.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=3259> (accessed January 24, 2010).

¹³⁴ R. Bharucha. *Rajasthan : An Oral History*, 112.

¹³⁵ C. Guillebaud, 73.

¹³⁶ M.A. Dhaky. *Parsvanatha and Dhanendra Nexus*, 33

worship has produced performative variations which, in their complexity, make analyzing sacrifice problematic. This is most aptly demonstrated in the ambiguity attached to contemporary *sarpabali*, the performative “catch-all” incorporating classical Vedic, as well as regional, interpretations of snake sacrifice. *Sarpabali* may be variously performed as “a sacrifice to serpents, a sacrifice by serpents [or] a sacrifice consisting of serpents¹³⁷”. I would argue this performative ambiguity relates directly to the processual stages of inclusion, accommodation, incorporation, and assimilation that derive from the ongoing struggle for cultural equipoise within competing ethnospheres, accessible through the examination of ethnographic, textual, and material referents.

The first of these sacrificial nuances, the “sacrifice to snakes” is by far the most widespread and resilient of the sacrificial practices discussed throughout this paper. As we have seen, the abodes and haunts of the snake are often *caityas*, sites of sacred importance which are maintained in their natural state, or developed as *tirths*, enclaves with shrines and temples. Within these spaces anyone, regardless of caste, may pay homage in prayer, and through food offerings, to either a live snake, a representation of a snake, or, in more developed settings, a snake deity. This accessibility, described as “grass-roots devotion”, goes far in explaining the pervasiveness of this practice.

It is traditionally believed that snakes like milk (itself the sacred by-product of the cow, another sacred animal), and bowls of milk¹³⁸ are frequently seen placed before anthills, pools, and groves where snakes are known to live. To see a snake drink from such an offering bowl is believed to be extremely auspicious¹³⁹, an indication that any prayer made by the witness would be granted. In addition to milk, raw or broken eggs are occasionally offered, as well as turmeric, rice flour¹⁴⁰, and clarified butter¹⁴¹. Such is the belief in the power of propitiatory

¹³⁷ Hoek and Shetha, *The Sacrifice of Serpents*, 60.

¹³⁸ F.J. Simoons, 90.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ G. Ravindran Nair, 22.

¹⁴¹ F.J. Simoons, 90.

offerings to the snake, that during *Nag Panchami*, the pan-Indian festival dedicated to Nagas and snakes of all kinds, in which the enthusiastic feeding of live snakes, typically caught especially for the holy festival, frequently results in the death of the snakes from indigestion or asphyxiation¹⁴². This fact, greatly criticized by animal welfare activists and śramanic devotees as cruel, has occasioned the Indian government to ban¹⁴³ the use of live specimens in favour of state supplied brass idols¹⁴⁴. Even with this proscription, many continue to travel outside the country to participate in traditional sacrifices with live animals¹⁴⁵ in what is still thought of as an extremely potent ritual practice¹⁴⁶.

Outside of disagreements as to what constitutes an appropriate offering to the sacred snake, the sacrificial practice as a whole is fairly consistent throughout India, and as any *bhakta* will tell you, is not exclusive to snake worship. Feeding the deity is an ancient¹⁴⁷ practice, likely derived from ancestral veneration rites of feeding ancestors¹⁴⁸. Naga deities are also implicated in this form of veneration, as in the case of the Nagbansi Rajputs of Jharkhand, the Bais Rajputs of Uttar Pradesh, the Meitheis of Bangladesh, and the Mirasis of North India and Pakistan, who all claim descent from Nagas¹⁴⁹. Interestingly, there is debate amongst devotees surrounding the question of whether offerings aim to *pacify* snakes and Nagas, therefore being understood as implicitly aggressive and

¹⁴² Jyotish News, Aug 2000 Supplemental: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/1186579/JNAUGSUP2> (accessed 20 December, 2009).

¹⁴³ Bower and Johnson. *Disappearing Peoples?*, 69.

¹⁴⁴ Jyotish News, Aug 2000 Supplemental: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/1186579/JNAUGSUP2> (accessed 20 December, 2009).

¹⁴⁵ M. Bradley: personal communication, email received November 27, 2009.

¹⁴⁶ G. Ravindran Nair, 1.

¹⁴⁷ William Crooke, 103.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 148; Carter, J. Excerpted from *H. Spencer: The Principles of Sociology*, 45.

¹⁴⁹ William Crooke, 391.

physically or spiritually cruel¹⁵⁰, as it is described in much of the Western Himalayas¹⁵¹, or rather that the offerings are gifts exchanged for the valued commodity of preternatural blessings or protections, as Westermarck's theory of sacrifice postulates¹⁵² and as it is described by Hindu devotees during Nag Panchami.

The textual sacred snake within orthodox Hinduism has presented an exegetical scenario of inclusion to accommodation through contextual reconfiguration¹⁵³. From the earliest texts, the cultural collision and conflict between explicitly non-Vedic snake worshippers and Vedic Brahmin reveals an axiological divide centered on the source and nature of all earthly power. Beginning in the Rg Veda, redactors build a case for the sacred snake as a primordially non-human other, but more importantly, a non-sacrificial and therefore fundamentally non-religious other¹⁵⁴. In contrast, late Vedic texts portray snake worship in more intimate and proximal terms. Theirs is the narrative of close neighbours trying to get along for mutual benefit¹⁵⁵, of mutual inclusion. This inclusion correlates to the textual tradition of hybrid categories, liminal figures who act as intercessors between two (or more) otherwise incompatible groups. Consider the following passage from the *Śatapatha Brahmana*:

[A long haired person] is neither a woman nor a man since he is long haired. Since he is a man, he cannot be a woman, since he is long haired, he cannot be a man. And this red metal is neither iron nor gold, and these biting ones are neither worms nor non-worms. Red metal is used because these biting things are reddish. This is the

¹⁵⁰ Jyotish News, Aug 2000 Supplemental: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/1186579/JNAUGSUP2> (page 4, accessed 20 December, 2009).

¹⁵¹ O.C. Handa. *Naga Cults and Traditions in the Western Himalayas*, 10.

¹⁵² Jeffrey Carter. *Understanding Religious Sacrifice*, 101-102.

¹⁵³ Laurie Cozad, 150.

¹⁵⁴ A. Pike, 627.

¹⁵⁵ Laurie Cozad, 25.

reason you put [red metal] in the mouth of a long haired man [to ward off snakes]¹⁵⁶

Given this passage's explicit categorization of the snake as a hybrid creature, and the use of similarly hybrid agents as magical prophylactics¹⁵⁷ demonstrates a discomfort with the snake as a naturally embodied liminal figure. This liminality, conceived for affective and proximal reasons in the case of the natural animal, is appropriated and revisioned as sentient, a willing participant in the sacrifice¹⁵⁸. From this conceptual position, it is a short step to reconfiguring the sacred snake in purely Brahmanic terms, such as is recorded in the Vedic *sarpanama*, one of the rare snake-focussed Vedic rituals¹⁵⁹. This last provides us with the second of the interpretations of snake sacrifice, the "sacrifice by the snake"¹⁶⁰. The *sarpanama*, or snake-name mantras, are performed *exclusively by Brahmin and for Brahmin*¹⁶¹ represented as Nagas, or Naga disciples, during sacrifices¹⁶² to invoke the power or influence of the chthonic and elemental realms long associated with the sacred snake:

Let us honor the snakes on the earth along with those that are in the atmosphere and those that are in the heavens. Honor to those snakes! /To those snakes who are the arrows of demons...to those snakes who are in the trees or who lie in holes – honor to those snakes! / To those snakes who are in the shining sky, or those who are in the water. Honor to those snakes!¹⁶³

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁵⁷ Jeffrey Carter. *Understanding Religious Sacrifice*, 76-77.

¹⁵⁸ Hoek and Shestha, 60.

¹⁵⁹ Laurie Cozad, 28.

¹⁶⁰ Hoek and Shestha, 60.

¹⁶¹ Laurie Cozad, 36.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 29.

This passage, the first recorded association of sacrifice within snake veneration, is clearly an attempt by Brahmins to control the sacred snake through application of the Vedic mantra, the *sarpa* subordinated by sacred utterance, the heart of Vedic belief. This clearly demonstrates that by the pre-Kusana/late Vedic era, in which the greatest concentrations of narrative and iconographic hybridizations, the sacred snake was undergoing a process of domestication by Brahmanic and Śramanic redactors¹⁶⁴ as it presented a presence “antithetical to the establishment of exclusive control over the natural world”¹⁶⁵ which was, and still is, the primary concern of the lay devotees¹⁶⁶.

Imperative to understanding the resilience of the sacred snake, even in the face of these processes, is the core belief that immanent power is a transferable commodity¹⁶⁷, from greater to lesser, through direct devotional engagement.

The basic rule is that any being that a person considers more powerful than himself or herself in any particular realm of life can become an object of worship... [and] any action ... undertaken because of another being's power is religious action¹⁶⁸.

That religious action can also be sacrificial allows for the last of the interpretations of snake sacrifice, the “sacrifice *of* snakes¹⁶⁹”. The *sarpasattra*, like the *sarpanama*, is a ritual action intended originally to be performed exclusively by priests¹⁷⁰, suggesting that snake veneration was useful to the consolidation of priestly authority and influence. *Sarpasattra* literally means snake sacrifice, however in its original intention it denoted sacrifice

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 20.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁶ P.S. Jaini, 187-188.

¹⁶⁷ Laurie Cozad, 31.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁹ Hoek and Shetha, 60.

¹⁷⁰ Laurie Cozad, 36.

performed “by snakes” embodied as Brahmins¹⁷¹, for the “*sattra* is above all a ritual by and for the Brahmin officiate, who collectively accrue the benefits of their own endeavour¹⁷²”. Evidence of grass-roots intervention on this Brahmin appropriation of previously open practices suggests a tension between Brahmin ritualists and the snake worshipping populace at large. By the time of the redaction of the *Adi Parvan* portion of the *Mahabharata*, dated no earlier than the 2nd century BCE, a great deal of effort was exerted to undermine the sacrality of the snake¹⁷³. The scriptural relationship between the sacred snake and sacrifice wanes, culminating in the epic of King *Janemajaya*’s *sarpasattra*, arguably the most dramatic snake sacrifice ever described. Within this narrative, the *sarpasattra* is no longer depicted as a sacrifice by serpents but rather of serpents, a first in the literary history of India. Undertaken at Kurukshetra, the notable site of human holocaust which frames the *Bhagavad Gita*, King *Janemajaya*, *Arjuna*’s great-grandson, avenging the death/murder of his father (or in some versions his son) by the Naga prince *Taksaka*¹⁷⁴, creates a massive *hotr*, or sacrificial fire into which all the snakes of the world, natural or supernatural, would be drawn into and immolated – a veritable genocide of serpent-kind. Notably, it is this event that sets the stage for the telling of the *Mahabharata* epic. In the end, this serpent holocaust is only just averted by *Astika*, a hybrid Brahmin-Naga who quells *Janemajaya*’s wrath.

The practice of immolating snakes is still practiced throughout greater South Asia¹⁷⁵ despite it being officially banned in India¹⁷⁶. In Kathmandu, as part of a *panchbali* or “five animal sacrifices”, two snakes are frequently rendered to the flames with the understanding that they have ritually assented to

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Laurie Cozad, 37.

¹⁷³ Laurie Cozad, 52.

¹⁷⁴ Hoek and Shetha, 62.

¹⁷⁵ M. Bradley: personal communication, email received November 27, 2009. Consider: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8375591.stm

¹⁷⁶ M. Bradley: personal communication, email received November 27, 2009.

the sacrifice¹⁷⁷ as part of acts of propitiation to the mountain goddess *Indrayani*. The relationship between blood sacrifice, veneration to the goddess, and Naga worship is also evident in the lower western Himalayan region, where Naga are believed to be “fundamentally demonic and vengeful¹⁷⁸” and under the tutelage of equally wrathful goddesses. There, to keep the *Naga Devta* peaceful¹⁷⁹, animal and (anecdotally) human sacrifices are performed¹⁸⁰, although with strict conditions grounded in locale:

“...the Naga gods have always been very selective about the choice of sacrificial victims. Those Naga deities, who controlled the underground sources of water, could only be appeased by offering them women, usually having suckling child. ... Another class of Naga gods mostly confined to the interiors of the region ... demanded only the able-bodied young men in sacrifice...” where others were satisfied by any human. Still others accepted only male goats or in some cases milk¹⁸¹.

These mountain Nagas, characterized as capricious, wrathful gods, are again comparable to the *pari*, mountain spirits of the Hindu Kush Hunza valley who are likewise similarly propitiated by blood sacrifices¹⁸². Close examination of blood sacrifice to the Naga reveal there is a notable preponderance of wrathful Nagini, typically lineage deities, in environmentally sensitive or hazardous areas¹⁸³. This suggests a conflation of highland

¹⁷⁷ Hoek and Shetha, 58.

¹⁷⁸ O.C. Handa, 10.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*.

¹⁸² M. H. Sidke, 72-73.

¹⁸³ O.C. Handa, 108

pastoralist animism¹⁸⁴, *kuldevi* veneration¹⁸⁵, and lowland agricultural Naga veneration¹⁸⁶. I argue that the association of blood sacrifice with wrathful or highly dangerous deities in these dangerous environments are an upward valuation of the offering over the potential risk posed by an environment which is seen as hostile. The great number of taboos attached to land and water use in highland valley and terrace environments¹⁸⁷ lends support to this idea of sacrifice as measured against regional risks and affordances.

Final thoughts

This paper has demonstrated that ritual sacrifice within the broad practice of snake veneration is not uniformly expressed. The antiquity and cross-cultural breadth of snake worship has produced ritual and performative variations, touched briefly upon here within the context of India and the greater Western Himalayas. The multi-faceted picture that emerges makes theorizing sacrifice within the broader practice potentially problematic. However, by ethnographically contextualizing Hoek and Shrestra's formulation of snake sacrifice as a tri-partite structure, of sacrifice *to* snakes, *by* snakes, and *of* snakes, we gain valuable insight into what otherwise would be an unwieldy and unmanageable subject, which has often been a source of criticism in the study of Indian popular religion. By contextualizing the influence of external religious/political bodies in diminishing or appropriating the devotional impact of

¹⁸⁴ Jones, G. *People(s) of the Sacred Mountains: making a case for high-peak religious culture along the trans-Himalayas*. Panel contribution for 'Religion in India and Pakistan': Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Carleton University, Ottawa, CANADA. May 2009.

¹⁸⁵ O.C. Handa. 95; See also Jones, G. *Kuldevi Worship as a Subaltern Cultural Tradition for Jaina Women*: paper presented for panel on "Personal Encounters of the Goddess" at the 2008 Gaia Gathering, University of Ottawa, May 2008.

¹⁸⁶ O.C. Handa, 81.

¹⁸⁷ Jones, G. *People(s) of the Sacred Mountains: making a case for high-peak religious culture along the trans-Himalayas*. Panel contribution for 'Religion in India and Pakistan'; Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Carleton University, Ottawa, CANADA. May 2009.

the sacred snake, we were able to isolate multiple strands of snake sacrifice which are given greater or lesser prominence within different ethnospheres¹⁸⁸. The unifying thread for all three of these practices is the snake itself, a paradigmatic object of fear and awe, death and immortality.

¹⁸⁸ Wade Davis. *Light at the Edge of the World*, 5.

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Footnotes