

Archaeologies of the Written: Indian, Tibetan, and
Buddhist Studies in Honour of Cristina Scherrer-Schaub

Series Minor

LXXXIX

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Archaeologies of the Written: Indian,
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Cristina Scherrer-Schaub

Edited by
Vincent Tournier, Vincent Eltschinger,
and Marta Sernesi



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Cristina Scherrer-Schaub at the XIIIth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, December 2002.

*Sacrifice in Brahmanism, Buddhism,
and Elsewhere: Theory and Practice**

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There is a widespread conviction among human beings that the world we live in, our ordinary reality, is not all there is. There is also a higher reality, different from and more real than our everyday world. We can enter into contact with this higher reality, in various ways. One of the most frequent methods to do so is ritual. Ritual acts can be understood as procedures to anchor important transactions, transitions and relationships into this higher reality. A wedding ceremony gives a deeper reality to a specific transaction between two parties, making it irreversible. Initiation rituals, similarly, anchor transitions into this higher reality, adding a dimension to transitions that might otherwise be considered normal and inevitable.

One human concern is particularly important in this context: hierarchical relationships. In a hierarchical relationship one party is superior, the other inferior. Such a relationship finds its most visible expression when a superior person takes from the inferior

* This paper brings together and further elaborates ideas presented in earlier publications of mine mentioned in the references below. These publications provide further details and references.

person something that is dear to the latter, in the final resort even the inferior person's life. Such acts of violence occur all the time among humans, and have no special connection with religion, ritual or sacrifice. However, such unequal relationships can be anchored into a higher reality and thus rendered permanent and unchangeable. This requires ritual enactment of the hierarchical relationship. In such a ritual both the superior and the inferior person (or persons) have to participate of their own free will. A typical ingredient of such a ritual is that the inferior persons, of their own free will, part with something that is dear to them or even, in extreme cases, with their own life.

I will use the word sacrifice to designate rituals that concern the hierarchical relationship between a superior and an inferior person. Both the superior and the inferior person can be human, but often the superior person is divine. This does not affect the general scheme, because there are examples from different cultures where both persons are human. When the Roman emperors had their subjects perform sacrifices to them, only modern scholars could come up with the idea that only the divinization of the emperors could explain this. In reality such sacrifices concerned the relationships between two humans: the emperor and his subject. Sometimes this relationship between humans is hidden, yet discernible to those who look. The ancient Indian Horse Sacrifice anchored a hierarchical relationship between humans in a higher reality: it established the superiority of the initiator of the sacrifice, a king, over rival neighbouring kings. The sacrifice yet culminates in a ceremony in which the king sacrifices a horse to gods, but this merely reveals the triple structure of this sacrifice: it establishes the superiority of the king with respect to his rivals, while at the same time subordinating him to the gods. A similar situation prevailed among the Aztecs. They took the most prized possessions of their neighbours, i.e., their best warriors, and ritually put them to death. The superior position of the Aztecs with respect to their neighbours is there for all to see, and the fact that those captive warriors were sacrificed to gods does not change this.

We have already seen that a sacrifice (in the sense here used) requires agreement from all parties, including the inferior party. It is striking to see that often the inferior party does not only consent to participate, but actually takes the initiative. This should not sur-

prise us. The human predisposition to social hierarchy does not only account for the urge to be superior to others, but also, and often simultaneously, for the urge to be inferior. This latter urge may indeed be a factor contributing to the human tendency to believe in superior divine beings: it is no doubt safer to practice one's inferiority with respect to such beings rather than toward the first passing robber baron who has succeeded in imposing his will.

So far we have skipped the most important questions. Why are so many people convinced that there is a higher reality, more real than our ordinary world? And what procedures are required in order to get into contact with that higher reality? How and why does ritual succeed in gaining access to it? And how does one anchor transactions, transitions and relationships into a higher reality?

All these questions allow of a single answer, which is of a psychological nature. The way our mind works predisposes us to believe in a higher reality, and it determines the ways in which we believe we can enter into contact with it. So how does it work?

It is well known to psychologists and philosophers that ordinary perception is interpreted perception. We do not see the world as it is, but as interpreted in the light of our memories, expectations and other mental contents. Briefly put, numerous mental associations contribute to our awareness of the world, to what we consider ordinary reality. Different mental associations result in different ways in which we experience the world. So does a reduced number of mental associations. A reduced number of mental associations leads to a less interpreted perception of the world.

We know that in all cultures there are individuals who, for whatever reason and by whatever means, have extraordinary experiences that they think put them into contact with a higher reality. This is the result of a strong reduction in mental associations. Such strong reductions of mental associations are not accessible to everyone, but to a more limited extent such reductions, and with them a changed perception of the world, are common to all of us. The reason is that there is a logic behind the reduction of mental associations. We reduce mental associations by concentrating, by getting absorbed, and the deeper the absorption, the fewer mental associations contribute to our perception of the world. We may not be aware that in states of absorption we cognize the world dif-

ferently, but we do seek out activities and places that facilitate absorption in situations where that higher reality plays a role. Fixed and repetitive movements have that effect, and it is known that such movements characterize rituals. Meditation and prayer, too, can induce absorption, and there is no need to remind you that these are frequently used means to enter into contact with higher reality.

Let us return to the sacrifice. One can impose one's superiority without the help of rituals: one can simply destroy the other party's property, or the inferior person herself. One does not need rituals to manifest one's inferiority either. But if one wishes to anchor that hierarchical relationship into higher reality, if one wishes to solemnize it and make it permanent, then the destruction of property of the inferior person, or the destruction of the inferior person herself, has to take place in a ritual setting. This means, in a setting that facilitates absorption, in a solemn ceremony that is preferably repetitive, and free from disturbances.

I can now further specify the way I use the term sacrifice: A sacrifice is a ritual that solemnizes a hierarchical relationship. Since it is a ritual, this definition does not normally cover "sacrifices" that a person can make for his motherland, his family, etc. (even though there may be situations where such "sacrifices" take on ritual features). The definition also excludes rituals that do not concern hierarchical relationships, such as many rites of passage, initiation rituals, etc.

However, the definition includes behaviours that are not normally thought of as sacrifices. Buddhism, for example, is said to be a religion without sacrifices, and indeed, Buddhism is critical of the Vedic tradition of sacrifice, especially animal sacrifices. But Indian Buddhist literature is full of a theme that looks very much like it: devoted Buddhists—including prominently future Buddhas—give away their body or parts of it. And this is not only a literary theme. The Chinese pilgrim Yijing reports that in his time there were Buddhists in India who burned their own bodies as an act of religious fervour. And in China, from the fourth century CE onward, there were instances of bodily self-mutilation, sometimes on a massive scale, in conjunction with the worship of relics or *stūpas* (Benn 2007).

This last element is important. Bodily self-mutilation in conjunction with relic or *stūpa* worship is a ritual manner of abandoning part of one's body in favour of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. It is therefore a ritual that solemnizes a hierarchical relationship, and is therefore a sacrifice as I am using the term.

I am not the first to see a parallel between Vedic sacrifice and Buddhist self-destruction. Perhaps the most recent author who has drawn attention to it is Reiko Ohnuma, who refers back to Hubert and Mauss, Paul Mus and Edith Parlier. She sees here a historical continuity between Vedic and Buddhist thought. This is indeed the way in which historians frequently deal with similar phenomena in different cultural or religious traditions. They propose a historical connection, and therefore an influence of one on the other. Often this leads to satisfactory explanations, but not always. The similarity of the Vedic sacrifice and Buddhist self-mutilation is an example where it does not work. Buddhism was critical of the Vedic sacrifice, so the claim that they imitated elements of it in their own religious practices is a priori improbable. It becomes even less probable when we remember that the Vedic sacrificer only rarely, if ever, went to the extent of destroying his own body or parts of it; he was more than happy to maintain that he was represented by the sacrificial victim (an animal or other offering). Why then should certain Buddhists go beyond this and do to their own bodies what the Vedic sacrificer was unwilling to do? And finally, why should the most extreme cases of Buddhist self-immolation occur in China and beyond, far from the region where the Vedic sacrifice had ever been practiced?

It should be clear from the above that the similarity between the Vedic sacrifice and Buddhist self-immolation cannot be due to historical continuity or influence. The only alternative explanation is that they are both due to the way the human mind works. This can find expression in recognizably similar ways in different cultures and religions, even in cultures and religions that have not influenced each other.

This last point hardly needs detailed proof. Sacrifices were part of altogether different cultures, some of which never entered into contact with each other. I mentioned the Aztecs earlier, and they constitute an example of a culture that practiced what we may call

sacrifice in complete isolation from other sacrificial cultures of the ancient world.

I therefore return to my point of departure. Sacrifice in its multiple manifestations can be looked upon as expressions of the functioning of the human mind. This mind is predisposed to believe that there is a reality different from ordinary reality, a higher reality. Human beings all over the world have developed methods to enter into contact with that higher reality. Some of these fall under the common denominator of rites: often solemn and repetitive behaviours that facilitate absorption, and therefore access to that different reality. Sacrifices (as I use the term) are rites, and involve therefore solemn and repetitive behaviours that emphasize hierarchical relationships between human and divine beings. Hierarchical relationships can and do exist without sacrifices to solemnize them. But there were situations in human history where sacrifices may have been thought of as extra guarantees for deepening or keeping in place hierarchical relationships. As said earlier, these hierarchical relationships may be between human beings, or between human beings and beings that inhabit higher reality, such as gods.

By way of conclusion I wish to draw attention to an article that came out in the journal *Nature*. Its title speaks for itself: “Ritual human sacrifice promoted and sustained the evolution of stratified societies” (Watts et al. 2016). The article provides and analyses important evidence showing that human sacrifice and hierarchy go hand in hand. In this respect it supports the position taken in this article. However, the article does create the impression that human sacrifice is a means in the hands of the hierarchically superior to assert their power over those lower on the hierarchical ladder. This may often correspond to reality, and the choice of examples considered in the article no doubt strengthens this conclusion. But this conclusion is one-sided, if our reflections so far are correct. Sacrifice, including human sacrifice, has much to do with hierarchical relations between conscious beings (human or divine), but the superior party does not always take the initiative. Sacrifice in some of its forms does not only give expression to the wish of some to establish their superiority over others, but also to the wish of others (or even of the same persons) to establish their relative inferiority.

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