

## Rites without Symbols

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### Abstract

In this article the argument is that there are rites, or parts of rites, that can be understood by all concerned without recourse to symbolical interpretation. This position is illustrated with the help of examples from different cultures and religions that impose a social hierarchy: typically there is one person or party that is superior, another one that is inferior. The initiator of such rites can be the superior or the inferior person/party. A discussion of these illustrations gives rise to further reflections, notably about the role of violence in ritual.

### Keywords

ritual, sacrifice, religion, violence, superiority, inferiority

In their eagerness to plumb ritual's dark symbolic or functional depths, to find in ritual more than meets the eye, anthropologists have, perhaps increasingly, tended to overlook ritual's surface, that which does meet the eye. Yet, it is on its surfaces, in its form, that we may discern whatever may be peculiar to ritual.<sup>1</sup>

### I. Rites that Impose Superiority

Many scholars—among them those who go to great lengths to find out how terms such as “ritual” may or may not be defined—take it for granted that rituals are symbolic actions. We find this stated again and again,<sup>2</sup> and yet I will argue that, in its generality, this claim can be questioned. The Vedic Horse Sacrifice (*aśvamedha*) will provide a suitable point of departure. The ancient

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<sup>1</sup> Quotation attributed to R. A. Rappaport at the beginning of Jonathan Z. Smith's contribution to Hamerton-Kelly, 1987 (p. 191).

<sup>2</sup> So e.g. Platvoet 2006: 204: “Rituals are symbolic actions.” According to Harvey Whitehouse, “Rituals are by their very nature puzzling activities that invite interpretation” (*New Scientist* 26 December 2009 & 2 January 2010, p. 63).

sources describing—or perhaps rather: prescribing—this sacrifice<sup>3</sup> have been studied by modern scholars (most notably Dumont 1927; Hillebrandt 1897: 149), whose work may be consulted for details.<sup>4</sup>

The Horse Sacrifice is initiated by a king who believes he has been able to establish his supremacy over his neighbours. Part of this rite is that a specially designated and consecrated horse is allowed to go where it likes for the duration of one year. It is accompanied by four hundred young men dressed for war, who protect it. A Vedic text stipulates that “if his enemies were to take his horse, his sacrifice would be destroyed”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, another Vedic text relates that a person of the name Śātānīka Sātrājita took away the white sacrificial horse of the king of Kāśī, which had already been roaming for nine months, before he performed his own Aśvamedha (according to a variant called Govinata).<sup>6</sup> In other words, the sacrifice of the king of Kāśī failed, the one subsequently initiated by his rival Śātānīka Sātrājita succeeded. Here, then, the freely roaming horse is asking for trouble. If it is not taken by enemies, the sacrifice can be completed. If it is, it cannot.

We are here confronted with contest in or related to sacrifice. This topic is not new to the study of Vedic sacrifice: it is a favourite theme in the writings of J. C. Heesterman, who maintains that Vedic sacrifice is nothing but contest. In order to make clear that Heesterman and the present article are not talking about the same thing, a little excursus about Heesterman’s ideas is here required.

Consider the following passage from his book *The Broken World of Sacrifice* (1993: 41-42):

sacrifice, at least Vedic sacrifice, is from beginning to end a contest. . . . We . . . find, embedded in the more elaborate soma feasts such as the *mahāvratā*, a New Year festival, or the royal rituals of *rājasūya*, *vājapeya*, and *aśvamedha*, regular contests, albeit neatly packaged in the rules of the *śrauta* ritual. Thus we have a ritualized chariot race in the *vājapeya* and the *rājasūya*; the latter, as well as the ritual for

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<sup>3</sup> The word “sacrifice” is here used conventionally, without any attempt at defining it beforehand. It is not necessarily limited to rites with a ternary structure (sacrificer, sacrificed object, divinity to whom the sacrifice is addressed) (Hénaff 2002: 236, based on Huber and Mauss), nor must it necessarily be distinguished from, say, offerings and gifts (cf. Van Baal 1976). The attempt in this article to account for at least certain aspects of certain rites in terms that do not refer to their mythological and religious context excludes any prior definition of these rites that uses elements (such as divinities) that are taken from that context.

<sup>4</sup> The Vedic Horse Sacrifice remained popular long after the Vedic period; see Pathak 1960, for numerous instances from the early medieval period; further Willis 2009: 183. The presumably most recent Horse Sacrifices were performed in Jaipur in 1734 and 1742; for details, see Horstmann 2006: 26; 2009: 44, 180-190.

<sup>5</sup> TaitBr 3.8.9.4: *yad amitrā aśvaṃ vinderan hanyetāsyā yajñah*.

<sup>6</sup> ŚPaBr 13.5.4.19-23.

establishing one's sacrificial fires (*agnyādhēya*), features a full-scale dicing game for the parts of a cow; and most importantly there are the verbal contexts, especially the *brahmodyas* or disputations in which the participants challenge each other with riddle questions that hold the cosmic brahman secret and that provided the model for the great Upaniṣadic debates.

The problem with this observation is that the contests Heesterman talks about are “neatly packaged in the rules of the *śrauta* ritual”. This means no more and no less than that they are no *real* contests. To cite Heesterman again (p. 42): “throughout the ancient Indian *śrauta* ritual the contest has left its mark”. It may have left its mark, but then only because it is no longer there. Heesterman is indeed compelled to claim that the real contest belonged to an earlier phase of the sacrifice, one that has not been recorded in the manuals and is, in the end, purely hypothetical.<sup>7</sup>

As a matter of fact, Heesterman knows that he has no evidence for the originally agonistic character of the sacrifices he writes about. He tries to explain the change into classical sacrifice as follows (1985: 87):

Vedic sacrifice, as it has been elaborated and systematized by the ritualists, has been resolutely turned away from its origins and from popular practices as well. It has been made into a fully technical and harmless procedure. Violence, death, and destruction are mentioned with a frequency that borders on the obsessive—for instance, the slaying of the Vṛtra dragon in the Soma ritual—but the ritual has no room for such violently heroic proceedings. There is no antagonist anymore, the dragon was slain long ago, and mortal peril has been replaced by the concept of the technical error in the performance of the ritual—an error that is to be repaired by equally technical means.

The hypothesis that such violent sacrifices may have once existed, prior to the codification of the sacrifices in the surviving texts, is confronted with further difficulties. Sacrifices, like most if not all rites, distinguish themselves by the fixed order of their constituent parts. Interrupted rites are failed rites. Repair is sometimes possible, but only with the help of more rites.<sup>8</sup> Bronkhorst (2010) refers to the work of many others to show that rites are holistic and should have no uncertain outcome; if they do, they are no longer rites. Real contests have uncertain outcomes. There is therefore no place for real contests in rites.

<sup>7</sup> Cp. Heesterman 2008: 134: “Thus we see that the remnants of the original contests—such as the chariot race preserved in the classical *rājasūya* and the dicing game in both the *rājasūya* and the ritual for setting up the sacrificial fire—are no contests anymore, everything being already decided by the fixed ritual. The uncertainty of the contest has been replaced by the dead certainty of the ritual.”

<sup>8</sup> The various contributions to *When Rituals Go Wrong* (Hüsken 2007) deal with this issue. Cp. further Minkowski 2001: 180: “Rituals cannot solve a broken ritual but by more ritual.”

Let us therefore return to the real Horse Sacrifice, not to its reconstructed pre-history. As we have seen, there is or can be a real contest around this sacrifice, between the sacrificing king and his neighbours. The outcome of this contest is not known in advance, but it determines whether the sacrifice can be completed or not: If the horse can roam undisturbed for a year, the sacrifice can proceed, and no major further difficulties are foreseen. If it cannot, the sacrifice has to be abandoned: it will have been “killed”, as the texts put it.

The two main parties identified in this brief presentation of the Horse Sacrifice are the king who initiates it and comes out as the winner, and the neighbouring kings who come out as the losers.<sup>9</sup> This identification of the parties involved is quite different from what others have proposed. Hubert & Mauss (1899), for example, emphasize the sacrificer and the victim in particular.<sup>10</sup> Hénaff (2002: 237, 240) adds a third party: the divinity to whom the sacrifice is offered. However, it is hard to believe that those involved in the Horse Sacrifice did not realize the obvious, viz., that this sacrifice concerned primarily the sacrificer, i.e. the king, and all those whose relative inferiority was publicly expressed and sanctified by this act. Anticipating what will be stated below about the nature of rites, one may say that the sacrifice “sacri-fies”, i.e., sanctifies (in the precise and limited sense to be clarified below), the situation of inequality without which there would be no Horse Sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> There are victims and gods, too, in this sacrifice (the horse is the main victim), but they are almost secondary in a drama that, first of all, concerns the king and his potential rivals. The Horse Sacrifice does not fit easily into the schemes proposed by Hubert & Mauss, and by Hénaff.

The feature of the Horse Sacrifice to which I wish to draw special attention is the following. The outline of this sacrifice (or at least of this part of the sacrifice) can be understood without any precise reference to the religious, cul-

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<sup>9</sup> Note that the neighbouring kings, though directly affected by the sacrifice, are not mentioned as participating in it, but this may be due to the nature of the Vedic and para-Vedic texts that deal with it. According to the *Vādhūla Śrautasūtra*, moreover, they are informed in advance that a Horse Sacrifice will take place; Dumont 1927: 355. And the description of Yudhiṣṭhira's Horse Sacrifice in the *Āsvamedhika Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* indicates that neighbouring kings do attend; indeed, those who do not wish to let the horse pass through their territory, are forced to do so by Arjuna and subsequently invited by him to participate in the sacrifice; Dumont 1927: 381. See further Koskikallio 1995. The preferred region for a Horse Sacrifice, according to *Rāmāyaṇa* 1.38.4-5 (cr. ed.), is between the Himālaya and the Vindhya mountains.

<sup>10</sup> Hubert & Mauss 1899: 15: “Le sacrifice est un acte religieux qui, par la consécration d’une victime, modifie l’état de la personne morale qui l’accomplit ou de certains objets auxquels elle s’intéresse.” For an analysis of Hubert & Mauss's ideas against the French background of their time, see Strenski 2002: 162.

<sup>11</sup> The word *sacrifice* is potentially misleading, and no equivalent terms appear to exist in cultures that have not undergone the influence of Latin; see Hénaff 2002: 213.

tural, symbolic or mythic context in which it takes place. I do not deny that precise knowledge of the religious, cultural, symbolic or mythic context of the Horse Sacrifice may be required for understanding certain details, but propose for consideration that these details have their place in a general outline which is intelligible without it. Indeed, we must assume that the king who initiated this sacrifice, and even more so the neighbouring kings who were directly affected by its outcome, did not need to study myths and symbols to understand what this sacrifice meant for them. What is more, the king who carried out the sacrifice scored a political point.

We started this investigation with the observation that many scholars take it for granted that rituals are symbolic actions. We have now come to the point where we must conclude that the Vedic Horse Sacrifice—or at least the parts on which we have been concentrating—appears to belie this: as observed above, the roaming horse *really* challenges neighbours, not symbolically, nor as a fossilized survival of pre-historic times. Further examples of such *real* challenges (or worse) will be discussed below. None of them have much need for symbolism.<sup>12</sup>

To avoid all misunderstanding, let it be clear that the Vedic texts do not neglect the symbolic side of the Horse Sacrifice. To show this, let me cite just one passage, the very beginning of the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*. It has the following to say about the Horse Sacrifice:

The head of the sacrificial horse, clearly, is the dawn—its sight is the sun; its breath is the wind; and its gaping mouth is the fire common to all men. The body of the sacrificial horse is the year—its back is the sky; its abdomen is the intermediate region, its underbelly is the earth; its flanks are the quarters; its ribs are the intermediate quarters; its limbs are the seasons; its joints are the months and fortnights; its feet are the days and nights; its bones are the stars; its flesh is the clouds; its stomach contents are the sand; its intestines are the rivers; its liver and lungs are the hills; its body hairs are the plants and trees; its forequarter is the rising sun; and its hindquarter is the setting sun. When it yawns, lightning flashes; when it shakes itself, it thunders; and when it urinates, it rains. Its neighing is speech itself.

The day, clearly, was born afterwards to be the sacrificial cup placed in front of the horse, and its womb is in the eastern sea. The night was born afterwards to be the sacrificial cup placed behind the horse, and its womb is in the western sea. These

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<sup>12</sup> The tendency of some anthropologists to concentrate on the symbolic at the expense of the ordinary is illustrated by Wrangham's (2009: 11–12) criticism of Claude Lévi-Strauss's view (expressed in his book *The Raw and the Cooked*) which Edmund Leach summarized in the following words: "[People] do not have to cook their food, they do so for symbolic reasons to show that they are men and not beasts." Wrangham's book argues that people *do* have to cook their food, and may have needed to do so for almost two million years; cooking may indeed have been a key factor in human evolution.

two came into being to be the sacrificial cups placed in front of and behind the horse. It became a racer and carried the gods. It became a charger and carried the Gandharvas. It became a courser and carried the demons. It became a horse and carried the humans. The sea, indeed, is its counterpart; the sea is its womb.<sup>13</sup>

I do not deny that the careful study of these and other passages may contribute to a better understanding of the Horse Sacrifice; it may or it may not. My point is that we can understand at least parts of the sacrifice without these, or indeed any other, symbolic interpretations. It is those parts that this article is most interested in.

The question we must address next is: What can we learn from the Vedic Horse Sacrifice? Are there other instances (whether in India or elsewhere) of sacrifices or rites that institutionalize social inequality by challenging potential enemies—and that are clear even to those who are not acquainted with the symbolism and mythology involved?

The answer, I propose, is *yes*. The Vedic Horse Sacrifice is not the only example of its kind. There are other examples of rites that have the function of sanctifying a situation of inequality.<sup>14</sup> In order to see the connection, I invite you to think along with me. Imagine that our king, rather than just sending a horse into enemy territory, were to go and catch prominent warriors from a neighbouring ruler, keep them prisoner for a considerable time, then to put them to death in a public ritual.<sup>15</sup> His superiority over his neighbour would then be evident, not just on account of the fact that he kills his neighbour's warriors, but because he kills them in a public ceremony, preferably a long drawn out ceremony, in such a manner that his neighbour can do nothing to

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<sup>13</sup> BĀrUp 1.1.1-2; tr. Olivelle. For other interpretations of elements of the Horse Sacrifice as found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, see Dumont 1927: *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> Others have made similar observations, so e.g. Lincoln 1991a: 204-05: "There are many distinguished scholars who take a rather benevolent view of sacrifice, stressing the way in which it furthers the construction of community or assists in the canalization of violence, to cite two influential examples. Yet I continue to be troubled by the radical asymmetry that exists between the sacrificer and the sacrificed, or between those who call for sacrifices and those who bear the costs. In theory, the logic, language, and practice of sacrifice are accessible to a great many people for a great many purposes, many of which I could comfortably endorse. Yet more often than not, the calls to sacrifice which prove effective strike me as offensive and the performances that are actually staged seem little short of criminal, particularly when those categories of person who already enjoy disproportionate shares of all that this life has to offer—men, victorious warriors, or kings, e.g.—are able to defend themselves and their favored entities as 'higher' than others, and to reproduce their power and their privilege through the sacrifices they impose on those other, 'lower' beings."

<sup>15</sup> It is of course even more convincing to inflict this treatment on the neighbouring kings themselves. A (presumably fictive) example of this is provided by the *Mahābhārata*, which tells the story of King Jarāsaṃdha, who was planning to sacrifice to the god Rudra rulers whom he had taken prisoner (Mhbh 2.20).

prevent it. This would be a ritual assertion of superiority if ever there was one. Such rites might be different from the Vedic Horse Sacrifice in every conceivable detail, yet accomplish very much the same goal by recognizably similar means. In both cases the sacrificer would turn a situation that is unacceptable to his rivals into a ritual act.

Sacrifices of this type are not known from Vedic literature.<sup>16</sup> However, they are known from elsewhere, in most detail perhaps from the Aztecs, at the opposite side of the globe.<sup>17</sup> The majority of victims of their human sacrifices were enemy warriors. These warriors had to be obtained in war, the so-called *xochiyaoyotl*, which means “flowery war”.<sup>18</sup> The aim of such wars was not to kill, but to obtain a maximum number of victims to be sacrificed. As in the case of the Vedic Horse Sacrifice, it was obviously crucial for the sacrificers to win the combats in which they collected victims, for otherwise their sacrifice would not take place. The element of contest is undeniably present, but for the sacrifice to be completed as planned it is vital that the right party win.

Similar sacrifices, involving humans captured from neighbouring or subjected people, are known from other places, too. A complete enumeration would go well beyond the scope of this study.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the evidence often leaves much to be desired, because there are not many human sacrifices that observers from the west have witnessed and have left reliable reports about. However, one more example will be given: human sacrifice of this type clearly existed in the state of Dahomey, in Africa. According to Robin Law (1985: 73-74), “human sacrifice was not merely a by-product of increasing militarism, but served as part of its ideological apparatus, since the public sacrifice of war captives supplied a justification for the waging of war. In Dahomey, for example, although in fact only a small proportion of the captives taken in war were sacrificed (most being kept as slaves in Dahomey or sold to the Europeans

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<sup>16</sup> It is however tempting to see the comparisons between the *Mahābhārata* war and sacrifice in this light. When the leader of one party, Duryodhana, expresses his intention to turn his main opponent, Yudhiṣṭhira, into the sacrificial victim of the war that is itself a sacrifice (Mhbh 5.57.12-13), this can be understood to mean that he does not just want victory, but a victory that sanctifies his situation of superiority. See Feller 2009; further Feller Jatavallabhula 1999. For a second comparison between the *Mahābhārata* war and sacrifice, see note 39, below.

<sup>17</sup> Some authors have unconvincingly tried to deny that human sacrifice took place among the Aztecs; see Graulich 2005: 11.

<sup>18</sup> Duverger 1978: 136; 1979: 103-104 (with note 1); 2004: 40; Clendinnen 1991: 97. One of the neighbouring cities from which sacrificial victims were obtained was Tlaxcala, about which Bray (1968: 26-27) writes: “The conquests of Axayácatl had left Tlaxcala completely encircled by Mexican territory. There was constant war between the two states, and it is possible that the Aztecs deliberately refrained from crushing Tlaxcala because they found it was a useful source of prisoners for sacrifice.”

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Helfrich 1973: 42.

at the coast), official ideology created the impression that the principal purpose of warfare was to supply victims for sacrifices to deceased kings.”

This second example is of particular interest, because we have a statement of one of the principal actors involved, which shows his awareness of the social and political consequences of these human sacrifices. “King Kpengla of Dahomey, in an explanation of human sacrifice offered to a European enquirer in the 1780s, avowed . . . : ‘You have seen me kill many men at the Customs. . . . This gives a grandeur to my Customs, far beyond the display of fine things which I buy. This makes my enemies fear me, and gives me such a name in the bush.’”<sup>20</sup> It appears therefore that the central point of the Annual Customs in Dahomey, during which human sacrifices took place, was to assert and reinforce royal power.<sup>21</sup> Law, who makes this observation, continues (1985: 75): “It is noteworthy . . . that both Agaja, who is said to have introduced the Annual Customs in the early eighteenth century, and Gezo, who extended and elaborated them in the early nineteenth century, were usurpers . . . Both, therefore, had an obvious interest in reinforcing their somewhat questionable legitimacy by an extravagant display of attention to the cult of their royal ancestors.”

I will not discuss further examples of these rather repugnant customs, but emphasize, with King Kpengla of Dahomey, the political role which they obviously played. Detailed knowledge of the religion and mythology of the Aztecs, or of the kingdom of Dahomey, may help us to understand details; we do not need it to understand what these sacrifices in general meant to those affected by them.

Examples of this kind of “political” human sacrifice may not be very frequent in recorded history (even though they appear to have been almost omnipresent especially in Meso- and South-America). They must be distinguished from other forms of ceremonial killing, such as the wide-spread “following into death”, the killing of servants or associates of important men after their demise. The Indian custom of *satee*—in which a widow follows her dead husband on the funeral pyre—falls in this category, about which we will have more to say below. Kings in ancient China, and more recently in Benin and other countries, were followed into death by sometimes considerable numbers of people, but these human sacrifices are, at least at first sight, quite different from the ones we are discussing. The “regular” Aztec and Dahomey human sacrifices, as I argue, had structural similarities with the Vedic Horse Sacrifice: both infringed upon their neighbours’ rights by taking away from them, ritually, what belonged to them, whether it be authority over a country, or the

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<sup>20</sup> Law 1985: 74, with a reference to [Archibald] Dalzel, *History of Dahomy*, p. 220.

<sup>21</sup> See also Herskovits 1967: II: 53.

possession of an army of warriors. In both cases these prerogatives are leisurely, ritually, infringed upon, creating in this manner a new, ritually sanctified, situation.

Let me now invite you once again to think along with me. Catching enemy warriors, keeping them alive for a considerable time while yet preventing them from escaping, to finally execute them in public, all this requires an amount of organization that only a well-run state can provide. The Aztecs and the kingdom of Dahomey had that, others did not. It is easy to see that, without such an organization, much trouble could be avoided by killing the enemy at the first encounter, then take his or her body or its most important part back home so as to use it in ritual. This is, of course, what often happened in the once wide-spread custom of headhunting.

Janet Hoskins, the editor of a volume about headhunting in Southeast Asia, defines headhunting “as an organized, coherent form of violence in which the severed head is given a specific ritual meaning and the act of headtaking is consecrated and commemorated in some form” (1996: 2). She further observes, on the same page, that “the material ‘facts’ of headhunting cannot be understood independent of its symbolic and ritual elaboration”.<sup>22</sup>

And yet, these “material ‘facts’” of headhunting are interesting enough to merit consideration in their own right. Whatever the precise interpretation or treatment accorded to them, the smoked and dried hunted heads stuck on poles surrounding the cult house or fixed in the branches of a large banyan tree were an obvious and indubitable sign to anyone who cared to look that the Nabuasa of West Timor, described by McWilliam (1996), occupied a dominant position among the neighbours from whom these heads were taken. And it is not surprising that these same heads could play a role in ritual. Indeed, McWilliam (p. 156) draws attention to the elaborate ritual aspects of headhunting and the “sacred” nature of the headhunters’ journey, but then points out that “it is clear that the ceremonial aspects of headhunting, and the undoubted success of the cult under Nabuasa leadership, were vital elements in the prestige accorded the political center”. Once again, it seems clear that the consequence of headhunting in this and no doubt many other cases was to impose the superiority of one group over another, and no study of symbolism was required to understand this.

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<sup>22</sup> Hoskins (1996: 2-3) is aware that she and the authors included in her volume “place ourselves in opposition to most of the recent anthropological literature on war and violence . . . , which emphasizes materialist and evolutionary models. We do not treat headhunting as a form of ‘primitive warfare’ on a ladder of evolutionary stages leading to more complex formations, nor as an expression of ‘man’s aggressive nature’ or the ‘inevitable’ violence that occurs in stateless societies because of competition over scarce resources.”

An eyewitness account of a ceremony following a successful (but secret, because forbidden) headhunt is provided by Jules De Raedt (1996), who observed it in the nineteen sixties among the Buaya in the highlands of northern Luzon, in the Philippines. It involved a prophetess, spirits, dwarfs and, of course, the killer, and took the form of a feast that involved the whole village. The prestige and admiration won by the killer was great, illustrating the role played by hierarchical relationships in this custom.

The parallelism between headhunting and human sacrifice has struck earlier researchers. Hoskins (1996: 25) says the following about it:

Sacrifice is usually distinguished from headhunting by the ritual dedication of the victim before immolation. In several societies, such as those of the East Sumbanese and the Buaya, a living captive could be brought back and beheaded right at the village shrine. This was often considered the best form of sacrifice, but was hard to realize in practice. It is clear from the comparative evidence brought together . . . that human victims can be dedicated to the spirits after death, and in fact that was done in virtually all of the societies of Southeast Asia that practiced headhunting.

In other words, if you do not have the means and the organization to perform a human sacrifice, the next best thing is the headhunt. And if you do not have the means to publicly put to death a member of a neighbouring group, undisturbed and in ritual elaboration, you can go and kill such a person and perform your rites around his severed head. The message of your superiority will still get across, even if slightly less distinctly. Seen in this light, the connection between headhunting and prosperity, emphasized by many of the people involved, becomes less of a riddle, for obviously recognized superiority is an efficacious means to increase one's prosperity (cp. Needham 1976).

## **II. Variants**

I have dwelt at some length on a number of rites—the Vedic Horse Sacrifice, “political” human sacrifices in several continents, headhunting—because they are special in the sense that they can be understood, at least to a considerable extent, independently of their cultural, religious and mythological contexts. We do not need to have recourse to their “symbolic” meanings, nor to the symbolism that may or may not be attached to any of their parts, in order to understand that one party imposes its superiority on another.

The rites chosen for discussion so far have in common that they impose the superiority of one person, or party, on others. Once we accept this common theme in a number of rites, the question has to be addressed whether this may

help us to understand certain other rites. I believe it can, and I propose that two paths in particular can be explored. On the one hand there are rites which, like the ones considered so far, seek to impose the superiority of their initiator or initiators but which, unlike the ones considered, do not quite go to the extent of inflicting damage on potential rivals. The second path to be explored concerns rites that are initiated by the *inferior party* rather than by the superior one, rites therefore which aim at installing and sanctifying the inferiority of their initiator. Let us deal with these two cases in order.

### *IIa. Modified Ways of Imposing Superiority*

There are a few Vedic sacrifices which aim at imposing the superiority of the sacrificer but do not go quite to the extent of inflicting damage on rivals. Examples are the two other main royal sacrifices beside the Horse Sacrifice, viz. the *vājapeya* and the *rājasūya*. The *vājapeya* “the drink of strength or of battle” has a chariot race (and we have already seen that Heesterman looked upon this as evidence for an earlier agonistic form of the sacrifice, a point of view that we do not share).<sup>23</sup> The *rājasūya*, the “Royal Consecration”, has also something involving a chariot, viz. a mimic cattle raid: the chariot is pulled up among a number of cows that are thereby considered conquered. However, the cows are subsequently returned to the owner (Heesterman 1957: 127; Sparreboom 1983: 51). It makes sense to look upon these performances as blunted expressions of real competition and real conquest, which do not however tell us something about the past of these sacrifices: their significance is clear in the present, whatever may or may not have been their past. These performances indicate that the king could (and indeed may) engage in successful competition and conquest. The sacrifice reminds all participants of this important fact, but given that the necessary preparations have been made (which implies that there are no serious challengers around at the time of, or leading up to, the sacrifice), there is no need for more than a gentle reminder of the superior status of the king.

An altogether different example is provided by the Agniṣṭoma sacrifice (Caland & Henry 1906: 27, 53). Soma is a plant (or rather the stalks of a plant) that, as part of the ritual, is “bought” from a “Soma merchant” (in reality

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<sup>23</sup> Caland & Henry (1906: VIII) give the following characterization: “Le *vājapeya* ou ‘breuvage de conquête’ se dénonce au premier aspect pour une réjouissance populaire, mi-grossière, mi-fastueuse, postérieurement englobée par le brahmanisme dans son pieux rituel: on y chante, on y boit, on y court, et, sauf une ascension symbolique au ciel, la religion y paraît le moindre des soucis.”

a Brahmin or a Śūdra), after a prescribed process of barter, against payment of a brown cow one year old. The “Soma merchant” is subsequently beaten, and the Soma, from that point onward, is no longer treated as a plant, but as a king: it is seated on a throne, and hospitality is offered to “him”; the Soma-pressing at the end is referred to as “killing”.<sup>24</sup> Here the idea is evoked, presumably on purpose, that a high ranking person from an inimical community is obtained as victim for the sacrifice (see also Heesterman 1995). But once again the situation suggested is not real, and the victim is no real human being.

These last three sacrifices invite to be interpreted “symbolically”: in the *vājapeya* and the *rājasūya* aggressive acts are hinted at, but not really performed, at least not with regard to those who challenge the royal prerogatives of the sacrificer; in the case of the Soma sacrifice, a human victim is “symbolically” replaced by a plant.

The Agniṣṭoma yet reminds us of another Vedic sacrifice which *does* harm its real human victim, viz. the *puruṣamedha*, the “human sacrifice” of Vedic literature. As in the Agniṣṭoma, the victim (this time a real male human being) is bought from his family, this time for a price of a thousand cows and a hundred horses. The victim has to belong to one of the two highest classes, and therefore has to be either a Brahmin or a warrior (*kṣatriya*). Before being finally put to death, he is relatively free for a year, and can fulfil most of his wishes (with some exceptions, such as sexual intercourse) (Hillebrandt 1897: 153; Kirfel 1951; Sauv   1970: 184; Malamoud 1999).<sup>25</sup> It is relatively unimportant for our present purposes to determine whether the *puruṣamedha* was ever actually performed in ancient India; many scholars think it was not.<sup>26</sup> It gives expression, once again, to the idea that a highly ranked person from a presumably inimical community is obtained to be sacrificed.

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<sup>24</sup> ŚPaBr 3.9.4.17. See Schlerath 1987; Pinault 2008. In spite of this killing, some vedic passages refer to Soma as the king of the Brahmins; e.g. ŚPaBr 5.4.2.3: “This man is your king, Soma is the king of us Brahmins”; 9.4.3.16: “He then touches the [fire-altar] with [the formula]: ‘This man . . . is your king; Soma is the king of us Brahmins!’—he thereby excludes the Brahmins [from the power of the king] and makes them such as are not to be fed upon [by the king]”. (tr. Eggeling)

<sup>25</sup> As in the case of the Horse Sacrifice, the *puruṣamedha* has a “sexual” episode immediately following the killing of the victim (horse, resp. human being). This episode may be open to symbolic interpretation, and may therefore fall outside the scope of the present study.

<sup>26</sup> See however Bakker 2009. It is appropriate to recall here what Bruce Lincoln said about certain practices of the Scyths and Amazons (1991a: 198): “I should note the possibility that some of these practices, like some of these peoples (particularly the Amazons), were more imaginary than actual, although . . . this in no way diminishes their interest or importance, for one can learn much from the imaginary practices of an imaginary people, particularly regarding the thoughts and values of those whose imaginations they inhabit.”

The one element that is slightly puzzling in both the Agniṣṭoma and the *puruṣamedha* is that the victim (i.e., the Soma stalks in the former case, the man in the latter) is bought rather than obtained in battle. After our earlier examples we might have expected that the victim be taken by force.<sup>27</sup> I do not know how to explain this particular feature, but it may be of interest to note that in some Aztec human sacrifices, too, the victims were bought. Presumably these Aztec sacrifices were initiated by merchants who, unlike the warriors, were not trained in collecting victims in battle. The increasingly important position of these merchants obliged them (or made it inviting to them) to participate in sacrifices, but understandably they did not acquire their victims through the force of their arms, but by means of their wallets (Duverger 1978: 137). It is tempting to speculate that the purchase of a human victim for the *puruṣamedha*, too, finds its explanation in social factors. We will not enter here into speculation of this kind, all the less so since the *puruṣamedha* may have been a mere priestly construction that was never carried out in real life.

The notion of killing enemies, or rivals, is frequent even in connection with Vedic sacrifices that do not carry out, or hint at, inimical actions. Or rather, the at first sight innocuous sacrifice turns out to be *a means to kill the enemy*. H. W. Bodewitz (2008: 329-330) says the following about it:

It is remarkable that killing persons who hate the sacrificer or his priest plays an important role in the Vedic ritualistic texts. . . . The one who will be killed is called a (hating) rival (*bhrātṛvya*) and there is no mentioning of an official war. In a rather old prose text like the [Taittirīya Saṃhitā] we often read about someone 'who hates us and whom we hate'. A later text like the [Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa], in which such a killing is frequently mentioned, the stereotyped expression is 'he who knows thus kills his hating rival'. In the [Taittirīya Saṃhitā] often gods are invoked to kill the one who is hated and hates the sacrificer or his priest. . . . In the [Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa] the killing is mostly caused by, or based on, an incantation. By (or with the help of) sacrifice the rival becomes killed. Often one also tries to obtain his cattle in this way. A particular arrangement or way of singing the Sāmans in this Sāmavedic text guarantees the death of the rival. This ritualistic magic is also current in the Yajurvedic [Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa]. Whether this killing is only realized by magic or should be supported by this ritualistic magic in a fight is not clearly indicated in the texts.

Here one further step appears to have been taken. No longer can we speak of the mere consecration of inimical activities—really and fully carried out in the Horse Sacrifice and in the *puruṣamedha*, hinted at in the *vājapeya*, the *rājasūya* and the Agniṣṭoma. No, in these other cases the sacrifice itself *is* the inimical

<sup>27</sup> Another Vedic text, the *Vaitāna-sūtra* of the *Atharva-veda*, suggests that one gets hold of one's closest rival; see Malamoud 1999: 34.

activity, carried out and consecrated at the same time.<sup>28</sup> Bodewitz wonders whether real, ordinary inimical activity accompanied these sacrifices, but tends to the conclusion “that a real war is not playing a role” (p. 330).

It would be a mistake to claim that these other sacrifices *symbolize* inimical activity: this might be missing the point altogether. These other sacrifices do not *symbolize* inimical activity (whatever else they may or may not symbolize), they *are* inimical activity. They are inimical activity just as much as letting loose a horse in neighbouring territory, or sacrificing (if possible high-ranking) inhabitants of a neighbouring kingdom, *are* inimical activities. These sacrifices are inimical activities carried out by different means.

Before leaving this topic, a few words may be said about public executions. Public executions share a number of features with the human sacrifices we have considered. In public executions, too, the superiority of one party, typically the ruling power, is demonstrated, as is the inferiority of the other party: the victim of the execution, or more generally all those who belong to the same category. The public execution of Christians in the Roman empire comes to mind as an example of this type of behaviour. I would like to suggest that public executions like those of the Christians in the Roman empire have a certain entitlement to be included in the category ‘ritual’.<sup>29</sup> It is true that the link between these executions and religion is less straightforward than in certain other cases (at least for the executioners;<sup>30</sup> for the Christian victims the link was as clear as daylight), but it does not seem fruitful to insist on too close a link between ritual and religion (or other expressions of religion) to begin with. It is possible that the Roman executioners did not think of these events as rites, but we will see below that the Christian victims and their admirers did.

### *Iib. Rites Initiated by the Inferior Party*

The preceding examples all fit more or less neatly into the type of sacrifice that sanctifies the position of superiority of the sacrificer. In some cases—such as the Vedic Horse Sacrifice, the “political” human sacrifices of the Aztecs and of

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<sup>28</sup> Cp. Kulke 1992: 196: “In a traditional society rituals might well have been an expression of political action rather than a substitute of it. It was through these rituals that the sacrificer tried to influence very directly his own position and—mostly in a negative way—that of others.”

<sup>29</sup> ‘Ritual’ as I understand it; see part III, below, and the publication there referred to. The theme of public execution as ritual is developed by Guy G. Stroumsa in several publications; see Stroumsa 2005; 2008; 2009. My observations in another publication (2009a: 61) about the relationship between martyrdom and sacrifice may need reformulation in the light of the present discussion.

<sup>30</sup> But note that the link between sacrifice and capital punishment is explicitly mentioned in certain ancient texts; Prescendi 2007: 229.

the rulers of Dahomey, headhunting—this side of the sacrifice is undeniable and manifest. In other cases—such as the Vedic *vājapeya*, *rājasūya* and Agniṣṭoma sacrifices—this side has been softened down. That is to say, in these latter cases the basic pattern has been mollified. Softening down is not the only possible modification of the basic pattern. Another modification might be exemplified in rites that impose the relative superiority of one of the parties, to be sure, but that are initiated by the inferior party, and emphasize (and sanctify) the initiator's inferiority. Such rites could be illustrated with the help of the numerous ceremonies at and around the court of empires and kingdoms, ceremonies that serve the role of sanctifying the hierarchical relationship between, say, local (and therefore subordinate) rulers and the king or emperor (or president, or whoever else) at the centre of power.<sup>31</sup> These ceremonies can be looked upon as rites in the sense that they have pre-determined shapes and, like other rites, serve to fix a particular hierarchical relationship between people. In certain cases the inferior party can be required to part with things valuable to him, such as troops, goods, money or other supplies. These complex forms of interaction between rulers and their subjects can assume very fixed, and therefore highly ritualized forms in court behaviour. This behaviour gains in complexity as a result of the fact that many actors will be simultaneously inferior with regard to certain people (ultimately the monarch), and superior with regard to others.

An interesting analysis of French court society under the *ancien régime* is provided by Norbert Elias (1969/1983; esp. chapters 5 and 6). Elias appropriately raises the question “how certain figurations of interdependent people made it possible for individuals with a small circle of helpers to maintain themselves and their dynasties in more or less unrestricted power over an overwhelmingly larger number of subjects for long periods” (p. 3) and proposes a sociological answer. He does not, however, link the elaborate ceremony and etiquette of the French court with ritual, a connection that should yet be evident and that explains to at least some extent the self-perpetuating force of that kind of behaviour: as we will see below, this fixed and repetitive, indeed ritualized behaviour anchors the social inequality of the participants in a higher reality, and excludes (or is meant to exclude) the very possibility of a total reorganization of social relationships.

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<sup>31</sup> These cases should not be confused with straightforward signs and procedures of submission that are found in humans and other primates (as well as in other animals), as does, for example, Burkert (1996: 85). Primates, for example, have procedures of submission, but to call these rites would be a confusion of categories. More will be said below about the distinctive, and “sanctifying”, nature of rites.

Similar observations have been made by Clifford Geertz about what he calls “the theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali” (1980: 13): “[T]he Balinese state... was always pointed... toward spectacle, toward ceremony, toward the public dramatization of the ruling obsessions of Balinese culture: social inequality and status pride.” Geertz does not quite see these ceremonies as we do, i.e. as sanctifying and legitimizing social inequality. He rather sees them as ends in themselves: “[The Balinese state] was a theatre state in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience. The stupendous cremations, tooth filings, temple dedications, pilgrimages, and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends: they were the ends themselves, they were what the state was for. Court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics; and mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state, but rather the state, even in its final gasp, was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. Power served pomp, not pomp power.” Geertz’s remarks do raise the question whether ritual behaviour in the broadest sense is ever an explicit and conscious means to political ends. This much debated issue (see Kulke 2010; further Hauser-Schäublin 2003; MacRae, 2005) does not change the fact that, for those involved, this kind of ceremonial and ritual behaviour does have political consequences: for them, as will be pointed out below, it anchors the social inequality that it expresses in a higher reality.<sup>32</sup>

Further examples of ritual submission include the emperor worship well-known from ancient Rome. In the Roman imperial cult, as in parallel phenomena elsewhere, there was a tendency to attribute divine attributes to the emperor.<sup>33</sup> The Mughal ruler Akbar, one and a half millennia later, put it this way: “The very sight of kings has been held to be a part of divine worship. They have been styled conventionally as the Shadow of God; and, indeed, to

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<sup>32</sup> On those not thus involved, it did not have this effect: “In 1906, the Dutch army appeared, for reasons of its own, at Sanur on the south coast and fought its way into Badung, where the king, his wives, his children, and his entourage marched in a splendid mass suicide into the direct fire of its guns... Two years later, in 1908, this strange ritual was repeated in the most illustrious state of all, Klungkung, the nominal ‘capital’ of traditional Bali; the king and court again paraded, half entranced, half dazed with opium, out of the palace into the reluctant fire of the by now thoroughly bewildered Dutch troops.” (Geertz 1980: 11)

<sup>33</sup> Neither supernatural attributes nor focusing on any particular human individual played a role in French political culture at the end of the nineteenth century, which was conditioned—according to Ivan Strenski (2002), as reported by Kathryn McClymond (2008: 160-161)—by the prevailing Roman Catholic understanding of sacrifice as the ‘complete giving of self’: “True French patriotism involved the willingness to give oneself entirely for the nation, including one’s life.” Further examples of this kind can no doubt be found in recent and modern political life.

behold them is a means of calling to mind the Creator, . . .”<sup>34</sup> This should not blind us to the fact that emperor worship was also, and was often known and recognized to be, the worship of a human being.<sup>35</sup> Cults for a divine king are intermediary instances between ritual submission to another human being and ritual submission to a supernatural being, of which there are countless examples, as we will see. In all these cases a relationship of inferiority is sanctified by means of the voluntary infliction of damage onto oneself in one way or another. Most often the self-inflicted damage is economic and expresses itself in the destruction of some of one’s property. We will see that more extreme cases of self-inflicted damage exist, too.

Another intermediary instance of the above kind is the widely attested practice of “following into death”, whose most well-known manifestation is the Indian so-called *satee* (or *suttee*, *sati*), “widow burning”. The custom is not confined to India, and does not only concern widows, or indeed burning. Jörg Fisch, who has dedicated a book to this phenomenon (1998; English translation 2006), presents cases from various continents.<sup>36</sup> Here the widow sanctifies her inferiority to her husband, but the husband is dead. Significantly, the Indian position in this matter is that the woman concerned is not a widow; only if she does *not* follow her husband into death will she become one (Fisch

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<sup>34</sup> Eraly 2000: 208. See also p. 210: “a community of brahmins called Darshaniyas had become demonstrative devotees of Akbar—they would not touch food or water, or set about their work, without first venerating Akbar as he presented himself to the public at sunrise from a fort window.”

<sup>35</sup> Cp. Gradel 2002: 25-26: “Temples, priests, and sacrifices [in Graeco-Roman religion] were the ingredients of the highest or divine or heavenly honours (*summi, divini, caelestes honores*), and such were the most prestigious honours known to men. But they differed in degree, not in kind, from lower, terrestrial, or—as we would say—secular honours. They were ultimately an aspect of the honours-for-benefactions structure found in all relationships between parties of vastly unequal power and social standing in Roman society, such as in the interplays between subjects and ruler, cities and benefactors, dependants and patrons, slaves and masters.” “[T]he man-god divide in the pagan context could . . . be taken to reflect a distinction in *status* between the respective beings, rather than a distinction between their respective natures, or ‘species’.” In Indian mythology, it is King Vena who invites priests to offer sacrifices to him rather than to the gods (*Bhāgavata Purāna* 4.14.28). Closer to our time, the German Führer, Adolf Hitler, was the object of prayer. “The League of German Girls, for example, developed its own version of the Lord’s Prayer: ‘Adolf Hitler, you are our great Leader. Thy name makes the enemy tremble. Thy Third Reich comes, thy will alone is law upon earth,’ and so on.” (Ehrenreich 1997: 210, with a reference to Waite 1977: 35)

<sup>36</sup> See also Testart 2004. Testart rightly observes (p. 197): “Toute analyse symbolique—qu’elle soit sacrificielle, religieuse, ou ritualiste—paraîtra toujours un peu fade devant le tragique et l’horreur d’une coutume qui veut que des êtres humains meurent seulement parce qu’un maître, un grand ou un dignitaire est mort.” Instead of inferiority, Testart rather speaks of *dépendance* (p. 210-11). On the prevalence of “following into death” in Central Eurasia, see Beckwith 2009: 12 ff.

1998: 219; 2006: 215; further Weinberger-Thomas 1996; Leslie 1992; Major 2007).

It goes almost without saying that “following into death” is an ideal type, which does not always correspond in detail to actual practice. In other words, the real initiator of such a rite is not always the victim, and the resulting death is more than once (though by far not always) imposed. Closest correspondence to the ideal type is found in what Fisch calls “individual following into death”, exemplified by the Indian widow burning. “Institutional following into death” connected with the death of a person high in the social hierarchy deviates farther from the ideal type, in that it frequently involves the killing, against their wish, of numerous individuals. In some societies in Southeast Asia, moreover, the death of a person of high social status is an occasion for headhunting, the idea being that the killed victims will accompany the deceased person as servants. Here, too, the victim would occasionally be taken alive so as to be killed beside the grave of the person whom he was expected to serve beyond the grave (Fisch 1998: 178; 2006: 174).

Other kinds of voluntary suicide, this time for a higher being, are known. The Venetian traveller Nicolo di Conti (1395-1469), to take an example, gives a detailed description of a mechanical contraption used in the kingdom of Vijayanagara in South India to allow volunteers to cut off their own heads in front of their idols (Weinberger-Thomas 1996: 28). Jacques Gernet (1960) discusses the wide-spread custom of self-immolation by means of fire among Chinese Buddhists roughly during the second half of the first millennium CE and observes (p. 542): “L’autocrémation totale ou partielle—celle des doigts et des bras—est conçue avant tout comme une forme de culte et d’hommage... aux Buddha et à leurs reliques.” Indeed, a number of these suicides committed their self-destructive acts facing a statue or a picture of a Buddha. Judging by the testimony of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Yijing, similar practices occurred in India (Boucher 2008: 35).

The Vedic Śunaskarṇa-yajña belongs no doubt to this category. In this sacrifice the sacrificer, seeking his own death, throws himself into the fire.<sup>37</sup> It is not clear how often this sacrifice was carried out, if ever, but this does not really concern us at present. The very fact that the ancient systematizers of the Vedic sacrifice include this kind of sacrifice shows that it had a place in what they thought the sacrifice was all about.

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<sup>37</sup> See *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* 22.7.20-25 (Caland 1928: 320-321); Caland 1903: 28.

### IIc. The Ideal Type

At first sight, these forms of more or less voluntary suicide and self-harm are to be looked upon as a mixed category. Ideally, however, there are no categories to be mixed. In the ideal situation, the superior party imposes its superiority, and the other party accepts its inferiority with consentment and contentment. Ideally the victim consents in its fate, and efforts are made, where necessary, to bring this about. In an ideal “widow burning”, the widow chooses her own death voluntarily. The person who cuts off his or her own head in front of an idol does so out of his or her own free choice.

Seen in this way, the various rites we have discussed, though often very different from each other, correspond to one and the same ideal type. In this ideal type both parties agree to solemnize and sanctify a situation of inequality. If this implies that the inferior party or one or more of its representatives have to be wronged in public, perhaps even to be tortured and killed in public, then the inferior party will agree to that, at least in the ideal type. In practice one of the two parties, usually the inferior one, may have objections. In such cases various means, from drugs to gentle or not so gentle persuasion, will be used to make that party “consent”.<sup>38</sup>

Such means are not always necessary. I am not just referring to cases of widow burning in which the widow knowingly and determinedly chooses her fate. There is another group of rites which, though less gruesome, illustrates the willingness of people to be the inferior party. By and large one could maintain that most Vedic sacrifices are of this nature. The sacrificer offers himself in order to seal and sanctify his subordination to a higher being. In practice he most often offers a substitute for himself,<sup>39</sup> in the case of a Vedic animal sacrifice one of the following domestic animals: a human being, a horse, a cow, a

<sup>38</sup> Animals to be sacrificed in Vedic sacrifices are made to “consent”. The same is true of classical antiquity in Europe: “un *topos* de la littérature ancienne, aussi bien grecque que latine, veut que les animaux se rendent au sacrifice volontairement, donc sans liens, et qu’ils se soumettent à la mort avec docilité.” (Prescendi, 2007: 99). “Il ne suffit pas que l’animal soit, d’un bout à l’autre, conduit sans violence, sans lien, sans qu’on la force, de son plein gré; la bête est aussi censée donner par un mouvement de tête ou un frisson du corps son assentiment au coup qui va l’atteindre; à la limite elle se précipite elle-même dans le feu sacrificiel.” (Vernant 1981: 7, as cited in Stroumsa 2009: 174).

<sup>39</sup> *ātmanīskraya(na)* in the Vedic texts (e.g. TaitS 6.1.11.6; ŚPaBr 11.7.1; Schwab 1886: XIX); Lévi 1898: 132; Hubert & Mauss 1899/1929: 45; Biarreau 1976: 19; Thite 1975: 143; see further Krick 1977. Note that the cremation of the body at death is thought of in India as a sacrifice; Parry 1994: 151-190 (“The last sacrifice”). The comparison between the *Mahābhārata* war and sacrifice put in the mouth of the warrior Karṇa at Mhbh 5.139.29-51 concerns a sacrifice of this type, for the initiator (Duryodhana) of this sacrifice is also its victim; cp. Feller Jatavallabhula, 1999: 79-80 and Bronkhorst forthcoming.

sheep, or a goat (Schwab 1886: XVII; TaitS 2.1.1; ŚPaBr 6.2.1.18). It is no coincidence that domestic animals are sacrificed, not wild animals: only domestic animals constitute property that can be given up, thus being a substitute for the giving up of oneself.<sup>40</sup>

Other substitutes are possible. Ancient Juda and Israel knew human sacrifices in which parents sacrificed their first-born child (Römer 1999). Finger sacrifice is a fairly widespread phenomenon in various religions, as Walter Burkert points out in several publications (Hamerton-Kelly 1987: 178; Burkert 1996: 34; further Bronkhorst forthcoming a).

Let us at this point briefly return to the public execution of Christians in the Roman empire. I proposed earlier that it may be possible to think of these executions as rites on a par with more properly religious rites, but added that the Roman executioners may perhaps not have seen it this way. However, the Christian victims, the martyrs, behaved in a manner as if they did, at least in the accounts of their violent deaths preserved and admired by countless other Christians. These martyrs are depicted as welcoming their fate, and consenting to the tortures they will undergo, even inviting them. For these Christian martyrs, or at any rate for their numerous surviving admirers, the execution was an event that secured them eternal salvation, thus clearly linking the present situation to a higher reality.<sup>41</sup>

### *IId. Supernatural Beings*

Let us dwell a little longer on the observation made above, viz., that in a number of rites initiated by the inferior party, the superior party is a supernatural being. Clearly, in these cases the relationship of superiority-inferiority does not, strictly speaking, concern two living human beings. This means that these examples distinguish themselves from cases such as the Vedic Horse Sacrifice or the human sacrifices of the Aztecs and others. In these latter cases no

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<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith observes: "I know of no unambiguous instance of animal sacrifice performed by hunters. *Animal sacrifice appears to be, universally, the ritual killing of a domesticated animal by agrarian or pastoralist societies.*" (Hamerton-Kelly 1987: 197; see further pp. 202; Beattie 1980: 30; Hénaff 2002: 223) Note further that in other cultures than India, too, sacrificial victims are often substitutes for the sacrificer; see, e.g., Beattie 1980: 30. In spite of the prevalence of the use of domesticated animals in sacrifices, it seems that wild animals were sacrificed in some societies; these wild animals were not substitutes for the sacrificer, but for his enemy. See Bronkhorst forthcoming.

<sup>41</sup> McClymond (2008: 158) says something similar about persecuted Jews throughout Jewish history: "Jews who were martyred or who watched their family members be martyred found comfort and meaning by understanding those deaths as sacrifice." Interestingly, in ancient Rome the sacrificial victim offered to the gods is sometimes presented as having committed a fault, so that their killing can be presented as capital punishment; Prescendi 2007: 224.

detailed cultural information is required to understand which party is superior, and which one inferior.<sup>42</sup> Only culturally specific information, on the other hand, provides knowledge of supernatural beings in a certain culture. In order to understand the Chinese monk who engages in self-immolation before a statue of the Buddha, minimal information about Buddhism is required. Similarly, one needs minimal information about the religious conceptions of the person who kills one of his animals in a sacrifice.

This raises another question, which can be formulated, somewhat simplistically, as follows. Do people sacrifice themselves or something dear to them to a supernatural being because that supernatural being inspires such awe that they wish to express and consolidate their own inferiority with regard to that supernatural being?<sup>43</sup> Or is it rather the other way round: people have such a deep need to express and consolidate their inferiority that they postulate the existence of supernatural beings who can then play the role of superior party?

Formulated in this manner, the second alternative cannot be correct. No individual postulates the existence of his or her gods in order to express and consolidate a need. Individuals are born in cultural surroundings in which there are already supernatural beings. Whatever needs they may have with regard to supernatural beings, those needs may have to be fulfilled with the help of the supernatural beings already in place. This does not however imply that the first alternative is completely correct. It is at least possible, and in my opinion quite plausible, that the supernatural beings of a certain culture owe their continued existence in that particular culture at least in part to the need of people to have a suitable partner with whom they can enter into a superiority-inferiority relationship, a relationship that may find its most prominent expression in appropriate rites.

However, another factor has to be taken into consideration. Supernatural beings sometimes play very minor roles in sacrifices or similar forms of behaviour. The gods of the classical Vedic sacrifices are barely more than names. Indeed, Mīmāṃsā, the school of Vedic hermeneutics that preserves the sacrificial tradition, looks upon gods as subordinate factors in ritual and goes to the extent of denying that they have bodies with which they might eat the gifts offered to them.<sup>44</sup> At least as interesting is that Buddhism, which had no place

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<sup>42</sup> This does not, of course, mean that no supernatural beings play a role in the Vedic Horse Sacrifice, the human sacrifices of the Aztecs, and elsewhere. Their presence is due to a mixture, or perhaps rather a combination, of types of sacrifice, as I have argued elsewhere (Bronkhorst forthcoming b).

<sup>43</sup> The idea of Rudolf Otto's (1932) *numinous* or *mysterium tremendum* comes to mind. See further Michaels 1997.

<sup>44</sup> See Śābara on *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 9.1.9.

for sacrifices in the strict sense of the term, developed and encouraged a form of generosity, the “perfection of generosity”, in which the ultimate gift was part of one’s own body, or one’s life. We have already considered those Chinese Buddhists who burnt either a part of their body (e.g., a finger) or the whole of it before a statue of the Buddha. Indian Buddhist narratives, too, emphasize the importance of giving parts of one’s body, but in these stories there is no character—whether divine or human—with regard to whom the donor’s inferiority is expressed. The structural similarity between this form of generosity and self-sacrifice is striking, and I would argue that these two practices give expression to the same underlying tendency. However, the “perfection of generosity” does not involve any human or divine actor with regard to whom the pious giver wishes to demonstrate his inferiority (Bronkhorst forthcoming a; further Ohnuma 2007; Boucher 2008: 29).

### **III. The Distinctive Nature of Ritual**

In the preceding pages I have repeatedly stated that rituals sanctify certain situations, especially interpersonal situations, anchoring them in a higher reality. In doing so, I base myself on another study, in which it is argued that, due to the cognitive structure of the human mind, certain holistic and irreversible<sup>45</sup> procedures are believed to do precisely that, viz., give access to a different, higher reality (Bronkhorst 2010).<sup>46</sup> The wedding ritual, for example, goes beyond the promises that are exchanged, for these promises are, by means of ritual, grounded in a higher reality in which no deception is possible.<sup>47</sup> The Brahmanical ritual of renunciation, to give another example, gives a deeper dimension to the individual’s decision to renounce, preventing him to change his mind, return home, and claim his previous rights (Freiberger 2009: 66).

It follows that ritual activity should be distinguished from ordinary activity. Ritual sanctifies certain types of behaviour, but the same types of behaviour may also exist without being sanctified. Killing an enemy is something that does not require a rite, but that may be sanctified in a rite. In the same way, demonstrating one’s inferiority with regard to someone else can take place in non-ritual ways and contexts, but it can also be ritualized.

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<sup>45</sup> On the irreversibility of rites, see Michaels 1999: 35.

<sup>46</sup> Compare in this connection the formula uttered by the Vedic sacrificer who enters upon the ritual: “Here I move from Untruth to Truth”; Heesterman 1991; 2008: 135.

<sup>47</sup> It also attracts far more attention. To cite J. G. de Casparis (1992: 480): “A royal wedding on T.V. invariably attracts millions of viewers, more even than football matches.”

These last reflections have implications. There has been much discussion about violence in sacrifice, and about the link between violence and the sacred, and other such topics (see, e.g., Burkert 1972; 1983; Heesterman 1985; 1993; Hamerton-Kelly 1987; Lincoln 1991; Ehrenreich 1997; McClymond 2008). Some authors have claimed that violence is an essential part of ritual, or of the sacred. The cases we have considered have a lot to do with violence in ritual, but they do *not* suggest that violence is somehow a result of being part of ritual. Quite on the contrary, the violence in these cases is “ordinary” violence that is subsequently ritualized in order to sanctify the situation of inequality that violence contributes in establishing. Other rituals may conceivably sanctify situations in which violence has no place. The cases we have considered suggest that violence is part of ordinary, non-ritual human behaviour, and has no intrinsic link with ritual. We find it in certain rituals because these rituals reflect certain aspects of ordinary behaviour, including violent behaviour. These cases suggest, therefore, that the study of violence gives no privileged access to the understanding of ritual.

#### **IV. Concluding Reflections**

1. The preceding reflections are incomplete. Many will object to my attempt to dissociate certain ritual procedures (or parts of them) from mythical and metaphysical beliefs, and from symbolic thought. They may observe, for example, that if the Indian widow is willing to follow her dead husband into death, she must believe that this dead husband has not completely disappeared, that he survives in one form or another after death. Belief of survival after death, these critics will continue, is therefore a necessary condition for practices such as the Indian satee.

I am not sure if this objection is valid. I find it hard to accept that often simple women would take such drastic steps on the basis of some metaphysical belief. I do not wish to go to the extent of claiming that certain metaphysical beliefs have been created in order to make sense of existing practices. The interrelationship between belief and practice is no doubt complex. However, practices of the kind we are considering are not, or not fully, explained by the beliefs that accompany them. And if we were obliged to choose a causal direction, I would prefer to consider that certain metaphysical or mythical beliefs are based on the accompanying practices rather than the other way round. But I hasten to add that the preceding reflections, and the conclusions which they seem to justify, are based on a selected subset of ritual activities, and may need to be revised or refined in the light of other activities of that nature.

Generally speaking, most sacrifices and rites (though not all) are situated in a religious, mythical or metaphysical context. A sacrificer may burn an oblation (or extract a human heart) because he is convinced that this or that god desires to receive it. This, at any rate, may be the way in which he justifies his behaviour to himself and to others, and he may sincerely believe this. The scholar of religion may be well advised to remain sceptical.

2. Most of the cases considered in the preceding pages concern rituals in which one party ends up as superior, the other as inferior. Some readers may have made a mental connection with certain forms of sexual behaviour, where this polarization can play a role, too. Indeed, dominance and/or submission can be part of the sexual experience of many people. The two find their most extreme expressions in the practices known as BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism) (see, e.g., Masters 2008), but this does not mean that they only occur there. It characterizes the relationship between the sexes in numerous societies, habitually assigning dominance to men, submission to women (Bourdieu 1998; Hite 2005). In view of this, it may be tempting to conclude that there must be a link between ritual and sexual behaviour, at least in some of their manifestations. The sacrificer who asserts his dominance may derive sexual pleasure from this, as may that other sacrificer who submits to the will of God, or to that of another human being.

The assumption that there is a link between ritual and sex is not necessarily incorrect. Scholars of early Christianity have proposed to look upon the martyrological narratives of early Christianity as providing spectacles of sado-erotic violence to Christian audiences (Frankfurter 2009), and I see no reason to reject this out of hand. However, I would like to suggest that the link between the two is somewhat more complex than this. That is to say, the link between ritual and sex may be of a different nature than that suggested by the presence of dominance and submission in certain manifestations of both. I have, as a matter of fact, argued so far that the imposition of a superior-inferior relationship is not characteristic of ritual as such. Ritual rather plays the role of sanctifying such a relationship by lending it a “supernatural” dimension. And in the publication already referred to above, I have argued that the ritual solemnization of a relationship is possible because ritual evokes a pre-linguistic state of mind that *is* indeed closer to objective reality; ritual anchors this relationship in that higher reality. Ideally (though not always in reality), it does so through the intermediary of the state of absorption that it brings about in its participants. Well, absorption is also the state accompanying sexual excitement (Bronkhorst 2009: 81). This suggests that certain forms of sexual behaviour can pursue goals that are parallel to those of certain rituals, viz., to sanction a relationship of dominance-submission.

3. The parallelism between ritual and sexuality obliges us to proceed with care. Sexuality is not only about dominance and submission. Ritual, too, does not always or necessarily concern relationships of dominance and submission. Indeed, our preceding reflections suggest that confrontational elements may occur in rites in socio-political situations where relationships of superiority and inferiority can be established and maintained. Such rites are then used to secure the continuation of such a skew situation. Socio-political situations where there is no place for established and lasting inequality are imaginable and may have been common in pre-agricultural societies. This does not mean that these societies had no rites, but rather that *their* rites aimed at perpetuating the kind of coexistence, non-stratified coexistence, that proved essential for the survival of the group concerned. In other words, their rites may often have been peaceful affairs. This is the position taken by certain scholars, and it looks plausible in the light of our reflections so far. However, rites coevolved with society, and new kinds of rites came about so as to maintain and sanctify the newly evolving inequalities between its members (Wade 2009: 78 (“Music, dance and trance”); further Marcus & Flannery 2004). Most of the examples discussed in this paper belong to these new kinds of rites.

4. With regard to these new kinds of rites, rites that play a role in maintaining and sanctifying hierarchical inequalities, our findings suggest that they are often centred on a victim. In principle, the victim is immolated by the initiator of the rite, who imposes in this manner his hierarchical superiority. Alternatively, the hierarchically inferior party initiates the rite and may immolate himself. Most frequently, a substitute takes the place of the victim, preferably someone or something dear to him. It follows that the victim always loses out: either he loses his own life, or he loses someone or something dear and valuable to him.

This leads us to the inescapable question: “The issue . . . is not whether religious sacrifice is costly, but why?” This question is raised by Scott Atran in his book *In Gods We Trust: The evolutionary landscape of religion* (2002: 117). True to the title of his book, Atran looks for an answer to this question in evolutionary terms. In itself one cannot object to this, but the answer may not do full justice to the question if a vital intermediary factor is not taken into consideration. Religious sacrifice, and many of the other behaviours considered in this article, are not just human behaviours: they are *ritual* behaviours. And ritual behaviours distinguish themselves from other behaviours in being anchored in a higher reality (see part III, above). They are anchored in a higher reality because they are holistic behaviours that belong to the undivided world that preceded the division of reality that took place when we crossed the symbolic threshold.

What is the evolutionary advantage of anchoring certain behaviours, and certain states of affairs, such as a social hierarchy, into this higher reality? It is not certain that this question, formulated in this manner, can be answered satisfactorily. I have argued elsewhere (2010) that ritual behaviour is a by-product of the faculties that enable us to learn and use language. This is an issue that cannot be taken up again here.

However, the states of affairs that find ritual expression in sacrifice are often of the kind whose evolutionary relevance is beyond doubt. Hierarchical order is certainly a feature of human societies (and many forms of animal society) that brings evolutionary advantages. Whether the frequent extension of human society so as to include supernatural beings—often gods to whom the sacrifice is directed—brings further advantages, is a question that cannot be discussed in this paper.

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## Abbreviations

BĀrUp	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
BORI	Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona
Mhbh	Mahābhārata, crit. ed. V.S. Sukthankar a.o., Poona 1933-41 (BORI)
ŚPaBr	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa
TaitBr	Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa
TaitS	Taittirīya Saṃhitā