

Sacrifice in Different Civilizations

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More than most regularly used terms in anthropological vocabulary, the odd-job word “sacrifice” has a very wide range of referents. Between April 21 and 23, 2013, an international workshop on “Sacrifice in Different Civilizations”, was held in Anren, Chengdu, Sichuan to discuss the various definitions of it. The papers making up this special issue were presented in the workshop. These papers by no means exhaust the sense of the term even in the one case of the English language. In adding the variety of non-English indigenous terms roughly translated as sacrifice, we are presented with even more semantic variety

A first question therefore is what common threads, however limited, link the ideas behind the papers’ understanding of sacrifice. What, and how much, is there in common? Even allowing for the bias in looking only at presentations in the one language, English, is there some “family resemblance” in the diverse descriptions? The contributors variously explore classical and more recent approaches to the analysis of sacrifice. This introduction will therefore not repeat those summaries but will instead address some aspects directly arising from the papers themselves, some of which are more empirically focused on China than others.

A standard first assumption in conventional anthropological statements about sacrifice is that it is a kind of sub-order of offerings but made in a purportedly “sacred” context involving at least a triangle of agents: the item to be sacrificed; the person or agent making or ordering the sacrifice, or on whose behalf it is made (the sacrificer and the sacrificer); and that to which the sacrifice is destined or aimed (typically a god, spirit, or ances-

tor). It is an easy step from this view to that of Maussian notions of reciprocity (Mauss and Hubert, 1964), but with elements of obligation (to pay, receive and repay) augmented by emotional qualities. These include fear or love of the divine recipient, but also of anger with it, layered by equally strong emotions expressed by and towards the other agents in the triangle (or quadrangle if sacrificer and sacrificer are distinguished as fully separate from each other), sometimes extending to an intentionally violent spectacle.

The East African and Indonesian cases examined by Parkin start from this approach and are based on a distinction between subjectively unconditional sacrifice, as in the story of Abraham and his son, and the conditional forms amounting to bargaining with spirits among people such as fishermen whose lives at sea are always in danger. The contrast is heuristic in that it begins with the fishermen’s own expressed views of sacrifices in which they are involved and which vary between those regarded as beyond question (as in supplications to God) and those where negotiation is allowed (as with some spirits). But shifts occur along this continuum over time and according to changing circumstances, and, as among many peoples, with some flexibility in the quality and nature of the offerings to be made (as among Nuer where chickens may be substituted for oxen), and some variation in the degree to which violation or violence is deliberately made a spectacle.

Implicit in this approach is the recognition of a separation between supplicant and receiver of the sacrifice, predicated on such classical distinctions as that between profane and sacred, this-worldly

and other – worldly , or human and extra – human. However , this separation need not be based on the idea of the two “worlds” as fixed , polar opposites.

Thus , the Chinese ritual emphasis on hosts and guests within the frame of hospitality constitutes more that of complementary opposites. It may bring about reversals: human hosts invite gods as guests but god – guests may in fact be or become hosts. Feuchtwang analyses the complexity of Chinese “hospitality” and “hosting” , and draws out certain contrasts between his and other views. In what sense may “hospitality” or “hosting” be a form of sacrifice? It is in fact the burning of incense in the ritual sequence of offerings (e. g. of pigs and food) by humans to gods and ghosts that indicates the sequence as that of spiritual communication and thence as divine sacrifice. The role of ritualized burning and fire is crucial for human communication with the divine , as in other parts of the world. It is also said that “hospitality to gods is like an audience with an emperor”. This because the emperor is the only living human who is , so to speak , treated like a god by receiving offerings marked by incense burning. Conversely , when humans make offerings to other humans in China , gifts rather than incense are used , i. e. hospitality. Another feature distinguishing human from divine modes of hospitality is the question of who retains or acquires “sovereignty” and hierarchical superiority. Gods either already have or acquire sovereignty , as does the emperor , while humans who host other living humans retain it. Building on the idea of sovereignty , Feuchtwang outlines the role in China of personal self – sacrifice , i. e. giving up personal sovereignty. It persisted into the republican and revolutionary periods when subjects , as “children” of the state , were asked to give their lives for it , a transformation of the filial self – sacrifice demanded of Abraham.

Both Feuchtwang and Parkin identify a pattern of *dramatis personae* in their understandings of sacrifice as a ritual sequence or process of communications and responses. There is a triangle , quad-

rangle or larger set of agents such as sacrificer (s) / sacrificer (s) ; divine recipient (s) , item to be sacrificed; and other members of the ritual community , including householdheads.

Gibeault continues the dramaturgical theme and also introduces a pattern underlying Chinese sacrifice which he sees as based on the “internal logic” of Chinese cultural facts. He talks of the “grammar” of Chinese cultural life , of which sacrifice is an element in contrastive relationship with other cultural elements in China , much as phonemes get their semantic distinctiveness through contrastive relationships with other phonemes. In other words he does not look at sacrifice as an isolable practice but as made up of features which can be found in other area cultural areas. One such is that of the Chinese concept of “face” , which is discussed by Feuchtwang in the context of rivalry between rival households and household heads , and by Gibeault as indicating asymmetries of structure and power. Thus , to “face” a temple in China is , or is like , facing a mountain or facing an incense burner , or holiness or kingship , doing so within a hierarchy of relations. Moreover , one is either a superior placed at the north of a temple or royal court and so receiving the breath of yang from the south , or an inferior at the south exposed to yin breath from thenorth.

Such positioning lends itself to two kinds of relations with gods. One is that of paying “homage” or “reverence”. The other is making a “request”. This duality is familiar to us as two major possibilities in prayer. A worshipper can reverentially affirm their belief in a god and acknowledge its power. Or one can ask a boon or favor of the god (s) . Affirmation of belief sometimes precedes and presupposes the second. But such reverence is sometimes proffered alone as “pure” homage , and not followed by a request. In some societies , only requests are made to deities or spirits , with no expectation that they should first be explicitly acknowledged. But some sort of an address is normal in sacrifice. To that extent , sacrifice and certain

forms of affirmative and supplicatory prayer can be mutually comprised and , analytically , be likened to each other.

Gibeault breaks down the narrative and plot of a 16th century epic novel to show the continuity of these and other analogically distinguished elements. One episode has Zhouwang , the last ruler of the Shang dynasty , incorrectly making a request of the goddess Nüwa when he should only have been paying her homage. This is sacrilege and so he is punished by being turned into an animal. This can only be reversed through sacrifice and the investiture of a new dynasty. Subordination and renewal are thus here at the basis of what we call it sacrifice. This is a process or passage rather than a separation between humans and gods , as is proposed in other “classical” interpretations of sacrifice. It complements Feuchtwang’ s example of gods becoming hosts rather than as remaining separate from them.

Renewal as described by Gibeault may follow destruction , in much the same way that death may be the precondition of regeneration. The theme that sacrificial destruction makes creativity possible , if not inevitable , is pursued by Damon , again within the context of hierarchy. He draws on sources ranging from Melanesia and the USA to China. As in the cases of sacrifice described by Feuchtwang and Gibeault for China , the burning of spirit or paper money also figures in Damon’ s account of Buddhist temple ritual. It is an instance of destruction which moves the paper money which has become ashes from the Yang world of the living to the Yin world of the dead. Damon regards as a form of destruction the burying of objects of sometimes considerable value at the burials of the most ranked people , as among Melanesians practicing the Kula Ring , and as at the funeral of the first emperor of the Han Dynasty , to take two examples. Destruction is in this sense “loss”. It is a gloss that can be poignantly extended to the enormous loss of life that must have occurred at the creation of the terracotta warriors and mausoleum at the death of the

first emperor of the first Qin dynasty. Yet this loss made possible the creation of an afterworld for the emperor and , millennia later , a major modern archaeological and tourist spectacle in the twentieth century which attests to the remarkable achievements of early Chinese civilisation and to the absolute authority of its rulers. Damon thus goes on to argue that destruction not only makes creation possible , it also produces the conditions for the formation of rank order or hierarchy.

He follows the interpretation of the Melanesian Kula Ring as a process which , so to speak , enhances or depletes those who participate in its exchanges of valuables. At issue is the struggle to elevate one’ s name through the exchanges. But , while successful disposal of valuables in the exchange secures higher rank , this diminishes the giver whose loss of the valuable is also the loss of a physical or bodily part of him. Since partners to exchanges consecrate the valuables before they are actually given , this amounts to a form of self - sacrifice which carries on round the Ring and so links participants. It becomes in effect a collective sacrifice by virtue of the fact that a giver’ s physical loss is not regained through acceptance of a valuable from someone else in the Ring who , in turn , also suffers bodily depletion: the interlinking of partners is the sharing of irretrievable bodily loss through the physical wear and tear of successfully engaging in the Ring. Damon sees this bodily loss as resembling , and perhaps as part of a template of , the real destruction of bodies occurring centuries ago in the context of Polynesian sacrifice. Indeed , a key argument he makes is that it is not religion which creates the ritual hierarchies of power and destruction but the latter which get taken up by religion and ritual and thence by the development of forms of social order. Echoing the evolution of kingdoms , empires and their accomplishments , there is also the claim for modern times that massively expensive , wasteful and destructive weapons and defense systems inadvertently give rise to technologies seen as beneficial to human progress , from

transportation to digitalized information methods. But the price preceding the benefits is too high and prompts the search for less costly, non-destructive routes to such creativity. Can in fact this alleged principle of sacrifice be curbed in the conduct of human affairs?

Ambivalent in its effects, too, is what we might call the development of corporeal technology. As the framework of his argument, Rowlands follows Mauss and considers sacrifice as involving techniques of the body. Sacrifice can heal and so benefit the body, but may also transform it through violence, perhaps as a means to cure, or simply as expurgation. Either way, sacrifice consists of actions made upon the human or other body, making an object of it. But it can also animate or give life to sacrificial objects and so make them into subjects or agents who are dependent on the sacrificial process for their flourishing. Rowlands sees this as also a process of “feeding” the objects which thereby become living subjects, as attested to by examples from Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. Moreover, the ritual expectation that humans eat the “leftovers” of food offerings sacrificially presented to gods, made their bodies part of these ancient gods. And yet, though co-substantial with gods, men as kings and city priests sat at tables apart from those of the gods, an act indicating humans’ inferiority. By contrast, in Ancient Greece, gods and men sat together, which Rowlands sees as reproduced in the symbolic imagery of the Christian Last Supper. The commensality that may accompany sacrifice, like co-substantiality, may thus indicate communion, which does not however rule out internal differentiation or hierarchy in the communion. At root in the literature is an Aristotelian distinction between eating for no more than survival as a basic condition of bare existence and nourishment as cultural creation of personhood). It is echoed in a widespread lexical distinction between words found in some African and non-African languages between what we may translate as “good”, nourishing, “civilized” eat-

ing on one hand, and the “harmful”, savage eating of extravagant consumption on the other.

Rowlands’ s main ethnographic focus is on the region of the Grassfields in Cameroon, where he draws a further contrast which is analogous to those mentioned above. Among the kingdoms of the south, ancestors and ancestral cults mediate sacrifices protecting people from such harms as witchcraft. Other peoples in the remoter north shun ancestors and rely instead on living male, closed associations to perform protective sacrifices.

Among both peoples the blood of sacrifice is regarded as activating or giving life to objects and substances used or targeted in the ritual. Cited ethnography makes a further distinction. There are (wet season?) musical masquerade rites periodically aimed at addressing fertility issues, initiations and funerals. They do not include formal sacrifice but the acted-upon body or corpse in them is in effect implicitly offered as a kind of sacrificial food to the gods. There are also (dry season?) sacrificial rites explicitly aimed at repairing social dislocation caused by witches by exposing and frightening them off. For all their differences, both kinds of rite aim to give life. They do not always succeed, and Rowlands concludes by arguing that it is not violence that makes sacrifice effective. It is rather that violence occurs when the sacrifice is seen to have failed.

However their ethnographies are interpreted, it is evident that the contributions to this special issue display a very wide range of understandings of the concept of sacrifice. Indeed, it is more than an odd-job word, which was the initial, heuristic claim of this introduction. Its treatment in the papers forces us to see the concept of sacrifice as an entry point into ultimate questions of life and death and of how life can be sustained either despite violence/destruction or through violence/destruction as its means. In all cases sacrifice may initially take one of two directions. It may involve the death of the subject or agent of the rite (i. e. a kind of self-sacrifice) or of its object (i. e. the item

sacrificed or of the recipient of the offering, the sacrifice of another). Adding to the complexity is the possibility that sacrificed objects may thereby receive life and so become subjects or agents. Taken broadly, then, sacrifice is a cycle of possible outcomes which over time can straddle distinctions of life and death.

At the workshop, two Chinese papers on the Miao and Tibetan ideas and practices of sacrifice were also presented (for technical reasons, unfortunately we are unable to include them in this issue). First, Yang Zhengwen presented a spectacular Miao sacrifice, the “chopping oxen festival” (kanniu), and related it to the Miao memory of the archaic kingdom which the Miao ancestors legendarily established and lost thousands of years ago in their military interactions with the Han. According to Yang, local legends in Guizhou suggest that the festival has been modeled on the original state – inaugurating ceremony headed by the Miao King and devised by the Miao spiritual mediums and priests. In tribute to the Miao heroes, it has mapped out three worlds, those of the living, the dead, and those who are able to “master their own souls” – spirit mediums and priests, and it brings back the archaic Miao sense of sovereignty.

Unlike Yang, who easily found the concept of sacrifice useful for his description of Miao celebrations, in presenting her paper, He Beili was at pains trying to work out how her Tibetan examples can fit into our discussions. According to He, in Samye where she did her fieldwork, a Tibetan Buddhist concept of sacrifice – gtor – ma – is in use, and in any celebrations, the distinctions among what we have called “a triangle of agents” are also made, but the items to be “sacrificed” are not the same as those in the non – Buddhist contexts. The Tibetans, who hold a Buddhist view of the equality of all lives, never offer real animals and plants, let alone human lives, to Buddha and

other divinities. This is to do with the fact that Buddhism entered Southeast Tibet in the 8th century CE in a local campaign against the pre – existing nomadic sacrificial practices. However, to communicate with the divinities, the Tibetan still make gtor – mas with zanba, mixed flour of highland barley and pea, and mould it in the shape of animals and plants as well humans. Among the many interesting details He presented, an intriguing one is that gtor – mas consist of two types: those offered to Buddhas and those to the protectors (who were reformed local mountains and late spirits, serving as Buddhist guardian deities). While the items displayed in front of Buddhas are kept where they are for a long period of time and thus sometimes seen as abandoned, those in front of the protectors are burnt soon after having been offered. There is a third category of gtor – mas, the images of humans offered to demons, which, as He explains, are destroyed during the ceremony.

Yang and He’s presentations shed light on the different ways in which the relations between humans and a variety of “others” – things and divinities – are forged in the processes of sacrifice. In both examples, the material others, either oxen or gtor – mas, are the “cost” of the relationship between humans and gods. However, such material others can also be seen as quite different things: oxens sacrificed by the Miao are whole lives, while gtor – mas “sacrificed” by the Tibetans are mere man – made images of lives, being originally mixed flour of zanba. One of the implications of the comparison seems to be that a distinction can be made between the explicit and implicit, or overtly violent and “restricted” ways of sacrifice.

References

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