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Does Sacrifice Avert Violence?

Reflections from Nepal and the People's War¹

This article attempts to address the link between sacrifice and violence by exploring the settings in which they are to be found in the ritual order governing socio-political organization. It is based on extensive ethnographic work in Nepal, a country that was regarded as a safe haven until it was swept up in a revolutionary movement that combined Maoist ideology with a sacrificial impetus. If warlike movements generate an ideology of legitimization that borrows religious imagery, those supported by a revolutionary ideal tend to spiritualize violence to the point of developing a genuine mysticism. This was the case of the People's War in Nepal, which was presented as an apocalypse, led by warriors rejoicing in their own suffering and glorifying martyrdom as the supreme means of achieving the ideal goal of a classless society. *Bali dan*, sacrifice, was the main expression of this revolutionary movement, referring both to individual commitment and to the movement as a whole. Formulated as it was in sacrificial terms and by its own actors from the outset, the sacrificial dimension provided real momentum to the People's war, as opposed to retrospective attempts to lend meaning to violence, such as using the term 'holocaust' for the 'final solution.' In the case studied here, revolutionary violence was born sacred and, to an even greater extent, as a new expression of the most highly authorized form of violence that is sacrifice. This kind of identification is relatively common, probably owing to the fact that both war and sacrifice share common features as formalized contexts for the destruction of (human or animal) lives on behalf of a cause (or a higher power), for the benefit of the entire community and beyond, for the entire planet (in the case of revolutionary movements, which are meant to spread) or even the universe (in the sacrifice that governs the relationship with the cosmos). However, the frequency of the analogy between sacrifice and

1. I wish to thank warmly Bernadette Sellers (CNRS), who revised my English text.

war poses a specific problem, given that the former is generally conceived as a regulator of violence, whereas the latter generates it on a massive scale. A first response to this problem is to consider, with Hobbes, that war itself is one way of regulating the extreme and anarchic violence of the 'war of every one against every one.' Alternatively, one may consider that the analogy of war and sacrifice does not reflect any common feature between them, but represents a mere figure of style. A third alternative is to reckon that war represents a deregulation of sacrifice by transposing it beyond the religious realm. One last way of addressing this problem, which has been little explored to date yet needs to be developed without fully invalidating the other positions, consists of taking the analogy literally, in contradistinction to the second position, and examining whether sacrifice may not be intrinsically linked to wider forms of violence outside its restricted nucleus. Ruling out the possibility that a war of everyone against everyone might even exist, we would argue that collective forms of violence such as armed movements are not to be conceived as deregulation, but as a possible form taken by sacrifice, in contradistinction to the third position evoked above.

By arguing that sacrifice conditions, or even leads to, other forms of violence outside its specific ritual domain, I do not mean that all forms of collective violence may be reduced to a single, universal, sacrificial model beyond the basic principle of offering up life for a cause. Instead, I suggest that the forms of sacrifice related to collective violent movements display an irreducible diversity, due to their own, sometimes contradictory, logic; hence the necessity to resist the temptation to generalize and the need to examine in depth the reciprocal links between sacrifice and collective violence within specific contexts. In fact, the case of the Nepalese People's War suggests that the co-existence of various models of sacrifice within the same socio-cultural context, as is the case in Nepal and more generally in the Hindu world, is at the heart of the construction of violence. The combinatorial nature of their interplay borrows from a seemingly universal schema, and even more so from inherited patterns, but results in a construction that is unique in that it corresponds to a new, specific context.

When understood in this way, collective violence represents an invasion of the socio-political realm via a transposition of the usually controlled and limited area of the sacrificial. By virtue of this 'invasion,' the violent movement achieves the effectiveness of religious forms, asserting a relationship with a transcendent realm. Within such a framework, one participates in a movement whose disturbing nature – since some beings lose their lives in it – is surmountable when its purpose is to confirm or transform the world order. In the context of sacrifice, the form is ceremonial and fixed, while in the revolutionary context at the other extreme, it takes on the appearance of unorganized spontaneity. However, the latter borrows directly from the former, notably its vocabulary, and thus appears conditioned by predefined sacrificial patterns. In the Hindu world, this relationship does not go ignored, since war (*yuddha*) in general is equated with sacrifice. As in sacrifice, the violence that unfolds during the war is conceived in this context as being of a particular type, although at the same time it may not be recognized as such; this type of violence is seen as necessary and even valued.

In both war and sacrifice, it also has the faculty to take life without giving rise to a 'sin,' *paṇ*, and to rid death of its polluting nature.²

Following the path of violence as a guiding line for exploring both war and sacrifice does not therefore directly stem from an emic point of view, given that both the violence of sacrifice and of war is denied in the Hindu world (including Nepal). Yet, the similar though separate treatment of violence in these two contexts is remarkable enough to constitute a path to be explored. In the same manner, to posit violence as the essence of sacrifice goes against the grain of most theories about sacrifice, which see the latter as a way of expunging it. However, a movement like the People's War, whose entire ideology was formulated in sacrificial terms³ and caused more than 15,000 deaths, with thousands missing and many more injured, clearly calls for a review of the relationship between violence and sacrifice.

Sacrifice and Violence

In Nepal, blood sacrifice is a very common practice. Part of an ancient Hindu heritage, sacrifice here has not met the criticism that has marked the modern period in India, where it is banned in most states. In the context of Nepal, on the contrary, religious ceremonies today include the real carnage of various animals, from chickens to buffaloes. The vast majority of the population consider blood sacrifice to be the most effective way to obtain a boon, to satisfy the gods, or to contain or divert these divinities' anger. Priests and executors are supposed to gain personal merit and prestige, sponsors (or sacrificers)⁴, the realization of their wish, while even the victim is said to greatly benefit from being sacrificed, whether by reaching a heavenly abode, immortality or by obtaining a nobler rebirth. Remarkably, scholars who have studied sacrifice have not radically distanced themselves from this perspective, offering interpretations that scarcely take into account the violence at the heart of sacrifice and the role it might play, but that emphasize the benefits for the group, through the notions of exchange, gift, communion and mediation. (The emic perspective, however, focuses on the effect the sacrifice has on the gods, while the analytical perspective ignores these invisible recipients to consider only the 'indirect,' alleged effect on the group). Similarly, in the humanities, the founding character of sacrifice, strongly present in Hindu myths, takes the form of mythico-historical, sacrificial patterns that are conceived as being at the origin of social life. The most famous is Freud's theory of the murder of the father by the primitive horde as the origin of the rules of social and religious life; then there is Hocart's killing of the king, framed in terms rather similar to Freud's, except that the existence of a royal institution denotes the pre-existence of organized social life and that the

2. On violence in the Hindu context see Bodewitz 1999, and on its conception in Nepal and in the Maoist revolutionary movement, see Lecomte-Tilouine 2010.

3. On the subject, see Lecomte-Tilouine 2009, Chapter 8.

4. A sacrificer is the person who patronizes a sacrifice, and a sacrificer, the person who performs the sacrifice.

killing of the king is ritualized. More recently, René Girard drew another sacrificial fresco, claiming that, right from the beginning of time, the killing of the scapegoat has permanently regulated social life, which is constantly threatened by generalized, mimetic violence.⁵

The murder of the father or king is a powerful image that may be used as a model of founding, transgressive violence; Freud applied this model to the Russian revolution and the assassination of the Tsar, seeing these events as the realization of the myth of the primitive horde in which the brothers join forces to kill their father. Yet the model is limited in the analytical range it offers to help understand violence and in particular the event to which Freud refers. The Girardian model, on the contrary, does not proceed by images but seeks to understand the mechanisms of the momentum at play in collective violence. By its abstraction, it promotes an analytical approach to the facts and may be applied to a large number of observable situations. Yet, it is based on two assumptions that weaken it: firstly, its 'universality,' independent of any social organization, which in practice amounts to the generalization of a fundamentally egalitarian model of society. Secondly, the idea that the sacrificial ritual restrains the violence inherent to the human condition, a theory in keeping with most approaches to sacrifice and even, one might say, with those that acknowledge violence's central position. Thus, following in the steps of René Girard, when Lucien Scubla (1999) proposed getting rid of the long tradition of denying sacrificial violence, contrasting it with a conception of sacrifice as a violent act, the theory he then developed seems to correspond to the idea that he was actually fighting against: On the basis that sacrifice contains violence that threatens to spread in the absence of control mechanisms, the author attributes such great value to this principle that he suggests that the more a sacrifice is 'bloody' (or violent), the more effective it is, and that the sacrifice of plants, which do not fulfil this function, would expose us to the spread of violence. Without ruling out this possibility, it would seem that the type of transformation of violence operated by sacrifice cannot be reduced to the single function of 'containing' it. To quote just one example, Maurice Bloch (1992) has shown most convincingly that many rituals include a double cycle of violence, or 'rebounding violence,' which creates a process that is independent of reality and designed to modify it.⁶

Yet there is another property of sacrifice that is not closely related to the modalities of its internal logic but lies instead in its force as a 'representation,' in the two meanings of the term outlined by Louis Marin (1981, pp. 9-10): that is to say, both as a forceful presentation of something and as a presentation of something other than itself. This 'something else' is clearly polysemic in the case of sacrifice, and therefore may be related to the model of the gift, of the debt, or of

5. Another similar scenario, suggesting that religion developed from hunting, is to be found in Burkert 1972.

6. Maurice Bloch's theory is that ritual (and in particular sacrifice) includes a first form of violence aimed at weakening vital energy, then a second form applied to an external thing or being, which restores energy. This process has the aim of denying the natural process of weakening of the body through old age and death, by introducing other cycles.

communication with the invisible powers. But one of the most obvious aspects of sacrifice is perhaps not the 'something else' but what it forcefully presents, in that it acts as the ultimate model of legitimate violence, i.e. the capacity and even the duty of some members of society to publicly deprive a human or animal being of their life, for the common good. It plays this role above all in a context in which sacrifice is not unanimously accepted, as I believe is in fact always the case to varying degrees, and in this instance, the legitimacy of sacrificial violence is denaturalized and tends to be perceived as an expression of power.⁷

Even when it is not as clearly linked to collective violence as it is in the Hindu context of Nepal, one of the consequences of sacrifice being the model of legitimate violence is that it also acts as a framework within which violence may be legitimated and spread; hence the frequency of the analogy or equation of war with sacrifice.

Before going any further, we need to justify the association we are making here between violence and sacrifice, given that the latter does not necessarily involve killing (at least real killing) of a living being and is defined in its broadest sense as a gift or abnegation. The etymology of sacrifice indeed means 'to make sacred,' but in the Hindu context (in Nepal as in most regions of India), it is generally termed *bali dan*, meaning the gift of *bali*, a term of uncertain etymology but which is usually understood as the adjectival form of 'power,' *bal*, by the Nepalese, introducing the meaning of 'powerful gift.' *Bali dan* is described as a circulation of power, with the person offering *bali dan*, and receiving *bali*, power, from the god in exchange. The best rendition of this process would therefore be 'gift for power.' It is true that even in the Nepalese context substitutes for animals are sometimes offered, but only real animal offerings include a sanctification of the 'thing' offered and a sign of its acceptance by the deity (marked by the thrill of the animal after its purification), whereas inanimate objects are automatically accepted by the deities. Thus, only blood sacrifices truly establish bilateral communication between people and the invisible forces, and strictly speaking match Hubert and Mauss's (1994, p. 302 [1899]) definition of sacrifice, as a 'process that involves establishing communication between the sacred world and the secular world through a victim.' Since blood sacrifice alone leads to bilateral communication, we will only refer to rituals involving the killing of living beings when speaking of sacrifice and we will not take into account the type of transaction that takes place during the sacrifice, given the great diversity of forms that come into play here. As a matter of fact, numerous debates on sacrifice address this aspect, including the nature of the sacrificial gift (debt, trade, contract, or irrational expenditure) and the type of relationship that develops between 'the sacred and the profane,' or between men and invisible powers (reconciliation, distancing) within sacrifice.

The notion of violence, which in our view characterizes sacrifice despite the denial of this by the Hindu orthodoxy (and the science of religions), is difficult to address, given that its definition and limits vary in time, space and even from

7. On the naturalization of violence, see Bourdieu 1998.

one individual to another. Thus, though conditioned by the law, morals and ideology, the definition of violence is not hegemonic, and this is particularly true in the caste society, in which each group nurtures its own values parallel to orthodoxy. We can only therefore retain a broad, basic definition, such as: any phenomenon that at least one individual in a given group considers violent.⁸

Such a definition is made possible, even necessary, by the ethnographic approach, which bypasses the determinism of the dominant view as expressed in the texts and, to an even greater extent, the masking role it plays towards the whole process involved in collective violence. The text, so Girard says, necessarily adopts a single point of view: either that of the crowd, as in the case of myth, where the victim is always presented as guilty and no longer appears as a scapegoat; or that of the victim, as in tragedy, in which one is unable to understand the behaviour of the persecutors. Girard's remarks on the concealment of violence are useful when addressing the denial of the sacrificial and warlike violence expressed in the Hindu textual tradition. Nevertheless, anthropologists may overcome this limitation through ethnographic observations, which simultaneously disclose various types of behaviour and points of view during the sacrificial ceremony. As in the text, two main stances may be observed, but rather than opposing the 'crowd' and 'the victim' they oppose on the one hand the sacrificers, the sacrificers and the majority of the population, who rejoice, and on the other the victim, with whom some categories of the population identify themselves or commiserate. Yet this second position is marginal and linked to marginalized groups, in such a way that concealment of violence is also prevalent in the current ritual context. Here it consists of the ability of the elite to organize public exposure of the orthodoxy at the expense of marginal views, but without obscuring them completely.

Since the public organization of sacrifice falls to its ideologues and sponsors (Brahmins and Kshatriyas), it establishes and confirms the difference between men, which is staged during the ritual. Because of the strong parallel between the social and the ritual orders, the ultimate model of legitimate violence, the right to kill without killing, as detained by its custodian elite (the groups respectively controlling spiritual and temporal power) is akin to social domination. It thus takes an antagonistic turn in such a socially transparent context as caste organization and, what is more important as I will try to show, this is neither accidental, contextual nor derivative but constitutive of this socio-religious organization, given that it was already present in the oldest Hindu myths. As previously mentioned, Nepalese society is fundamentally organized according to the principles of Hinduism – although its recent history has seen significant protests against this religion – and shares the values of its normative and mythological texts. Examination of this broad ideological body helps to highlight the sacrificial nature of Hindu society at large (and of its Nepalese sub-species), as well as two of its features that are essential to our present study: first, rivalry be-

8. Violence is *himsa* in Nepali, and its definition roughly corresponds to its English equivalent. In the Nepali Brihat Sabdakosh (p. 1417) it reads: 1) to take the life of a living being or to kill; 2) to afflict others by some means.

tween men is not based on identity as in Girard's model; second, blood sacrifice does not put an end to violence, but on the contrary initiates it and contributes to its spread outside its own sphere to generalized, societal forms. One may certainly argue that burgeoning Hindu mythology cannot be so readily reduced to generalities. I would therefore appeal to two fundamental myths of origin, dealing respectively with the origin of the caste organization, and with the origin of kingship, to support the centrality of my proposals. On the other hand, to prevent any decontextualization, I will consider this mythology as it has been 'appropriated' by the group under study, at this specific moment in history, and then bring it to the ethnographic observation of the sacrificial ritual, just as I was able to observe it in Nepal. The result is a combined analysis of sacrifice, calling upon mythical texts describing this ritual as well as upon the accounts of the actors in the sacrifice, their ritual practices and feedback.

Founding Patterns: Sacrifice in Hindu Myths of Origin

Studies on sacrifice in the Hindu world have mainly focused on ancient India, although there are also works on contemporary practices of exceptional value. The starting point of this line of enquiry may be traced back to the publication in 1898 of *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brâhmanas*, by Sylvain Lévi, on which Hubert and Mauss drew heavily to write their famous essay on sacrifice, published the following year. Lévi aimed to establish a unified doctrine of sacrifice based on the enigmatic and scattered formulas contained in the Brahmanas. He notes that this doctrine leaves no room for morality; instead, it is a mechanical operation regulating the relations between men and the gods, and a 'magical operation' by which the sacrificer rises to the deity, with the dangers that this movement entails. Lévi outlines the myth of the god-sacrifice, Purusha, whose sacrifice gave birth to the universe, to show that in the Vedic context, sacrifice 'is the only reality,' and that everything else takes on its appearance, 'son semblant d'existence'. The study of Hindu sacrifice was subsequently marked by contributions from Madeleine Biardeau and Charles Malamoud whose work was jointly published in *Le sacrifice en Inde ancienne* in 1976. This book emphasized the Vedic roots of Hindu sacrifice, arguing that they have been preserved, as well as the unity of Hinduism. For Madeleine Biardeau, the essence of sacrifice is the abandonment, *tyag*, by the sacrificer of something that is a substitute for his person. Then, with the rise of Bhakti (devotion), sacrifice became the renunciation of the person for the deity. Charles Malamoud's contribution in turn focuses on the *daksina*, ritual salary, or 'price to be paid for the layman's body of the sacrificer, abandoned in the sacrifice, to return to its owner.' Malamoud notes that this process fits into the overall scheme of debt in Brahmanism, which governs not only sacrifice, but also the organization of the world, with sacrifice providing a model for the relationship between users and service providers.

Other authors, such as Brian K. Smith and Wendy Doniger (1989), have contributed interesting observations about the substitution at the heart of Hindu sacrifice, showing that between man, the prototype of the victim, and his surrogates

there are differences in degree that are highlighted in the texts. As they noted, sacrificial qualities may take different directions in the substitution chain: at times it is man, the prototype, who is considered the most suitable victim, yet sometimes at the other extreme, the goat is seen as the chimera of all living beings that may be sacrificed. For Smith and Doniger, sacrifice itself is a substitute for its ideal form, human sacrifice, conceived here as self-sacrifice both by the authors of the study and by those of the texts they study. This convergence of views is remarkable and has led to the failure to question the strangeness of considering animals, not other humans, as the closest substitutes for oneself.

It seems reasonable to assume that the choice of an animal victim as a substitute for the self reflects the distance from others that is cultivated in the Hindu context. This distance is made manifest in the division of society into classes and castes but, as I would like to show here, it is taken further in the differentiation between individuals, a fact that is particularly apparent with regard to twins, i.e. the human entities closest to one another in identity. Given that I am inevitably asked in Nepal and India about my family members, I have noticed that many of the people to whom I reply that I am a mother of twin boys, exclaim: 'Ah, you have Ram and Laksman!' These names that Hindus often give to twins, also designate them generically. In a second step, whereas Westerners would inquire whether they are identical or not, I am often asked whether the first or the second-born is the taller. Through this question, the difference between the twins is asserted: one is necessarily taller than the other, and the only unknown factor is how this difference relates to birth rank — the idea being that the second-born is generally the taller.

It so happens that the pair of mythical heroes who give their names to all sets of twins, Ram and Lakshman, are not themselves twins but half-brothers born of different mothers. The case is complicated by the fact that Ram and Lakshman have other siblings and that these include one pair of twins. Surprisingly, Lakshman is one of them. However, his relationship with his twin brother is never mentioned in the Ramayana epic and has not given birth to any model figure. Instead, Lakshman, the twin, is depicted as so deeply attached to Ram, his distant half-brother — and ideal Hindu king — that he follows him into exile for 12 years in the forest, and assists him in his most perilous adventures.

Twins are therefore far from creating this inseparability or mimetic rivalry, which is essential in many myths (elsewhere) as well as in Girard's theory. Instead, real twins are named or generically designated by the names of inseparable but distant brothers, whose inseparability breaks the twin birth link of one of them. This strange situation is clearly a model, given that it is also found in an attenuated form in the other great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, in the affection that Yuddhisthira has for one of his twin half-brothers.

This pattern underlines the fact that difference originally prevails, while identity (or at least inseparability) requires construction. Interestingly, this teaching from the two great epic poems comes to complete the creation myth, which stresses the sacredness of the differentiated nature of Hindu society, born as such from the primordial sacrifice. In Hindu mythology, there is no question

of a wild and undifferentiated state of humanity at the dawn of time, but only the primacy of sacrifice from which there emerges a complex society, hierarchically structured according to the verticality of the body of the primordial being that has been sacrificed. In the Brahmanas and the oral versions of the myth in Nepal, this first sacrifice is a self-sacrifice. Social classes emerge one by one, starting from Purusha's head and going down to his feet, and they are granted attributes that correspond symbolically to the different parts of the body of the primordial being of whom they are born. The class born from the feet, at the bottom rank, has no other function than to relieve the other three of their impurity. In this myth we can see, without taking its interpretation too far, the introduction of a social system that is sacrificial in nature, not only because it is born of the first sacrifice, but also because it is maintained by 'victims,' the impure groups, who, like scapegoats, are 'socially sacrificed' by taking on themselves the impurity of the others and being rejected as outcasts. Far from the Girardian vision of a victim randomly chosen at a time of social crisis, the scapegoats here are permanent regulators, and born as such, they have no way of changing their condition. The social system is also sacrificial in the sense that its scapegoats are not individuals but a group opposed to other groups, forming a dichotomy that constitutes the nucleus of the caste organisation.

It is this myth that Sylvain Lévi addresses in the first chapter of his study, similarly to most of the subsequent reflections on the Hindu sacrifice. But, one might say, they deal only with the first part of this myth depicting Purusha's sacrifice. The sacrificial nature of the society that his sacrifice produces has not attracted the same attention, although Charles Malamoud pointed out that the service contract between pure and impure castes reproduces what is at work in sacrifice. The prevailing idea is that Purusha's self-sacrifice is such a fundamental model that in the course of time, sacrificing animal surrogates for the sacrificer disappeared and was replaced by renouncement, as a closer reproduction of the primordial self-sacrifice. It is true that the Brahmins, who used to act as priests for sacrifices in ancient times, were then strictly forbidden from killing (or from being killed) and engaged, in India as in Nepal, in ascetic practices, with renouncement as their ideal. But animal sacrifice did not die out. While it is no longer practised or publicly practised in many regions of India, other Hindu areas including Nepal have taken the practice to the extreme. Nepal is described in the media as the country with the largest number of blood sacrifices in the world, with its Gadhi Mai festival quoted as a cult involving the killing of 300,000 buffaloes. Concomitantly to the return of Brahmanic sacrifice to its initial self-sacrificial form, a vast array of sacrifices emanating from another class, the warriors or Kshatriyas, developed in this context. This is hardly an anomaly, considering that Brahmins have never had exclusivity over sacrifice in the Hindu realm, as its prescribed performers, not its patrons. Sacrifice has in fact been a mutual concern between Brahmins and the class of kings and warriors, as evidenced – among numerous other examples⁹ – by the story of King Vena, which retells the origin of king-

9. On this structural conflict, see Dumont 1966 and Stern 1973.

ship. The grandson of the king of the dead, Vena, is portrayed as a terrible king, chasing men as if they were gazelles. He angers the Brahmins, not by his acts of violence, but by preventing them from offering sacrifices to anyone but himself, arguing that as sovereign, he alone represents all the gods. The Brahmins then put him to death in a collective and highly sacrificial manner, by whipping him with the sharp blades of grass they use to purify the sacrificial area, the ritual elements and their own bodies. The Brahmins sacrifice the evil king, this polarizing figure who does not recognize any authority other than himself, but the world without a king sinks into chaos and hordes of poor people attack the rich. To put an end to this new disorder, the Brahmins extract from the thigh of the royal corpse a small, black, hideous being, depicted as a tribal king carrying the sins of King Vena. They immediately banish him to the forest as a scapegoat. Then the Brahmins extract from the right hand of the royal corpse, now stripped of its negative aspects, King Prithu shining like the sun, who gives his name to the earth – his wife – and becomes the first earthly king.¹⁰

The ritual murder of Vena by the Brahmins presents a very different model of sacrifice, in which the victim is not a substitute for the sacrificer, but a model-obstacle for their group. Sacrifice here ends the conflict between the universal king (Vena) and the sacrificial elite, but interestingly causes a new form of violence, taking the form of a sort of class struggle. The two facets of royalty are then literally embodied in a small black being bearing its negative aspects, a scapegoat driven away from the civilized world of the Brahmins, and a brilliant king meant to maintain the social order and stay in his proper place. This ideal king does not oppose the theorists of the rite, makes us understand the myth and ensures proper order or 'social peace' by returning the 'poor' or 'thieves' to their original condition, while the tribals are ritually chased away, outside of living space, where they are free to reign.¹¹

Violent union against a model-obstacle is one of the scenarios analyzed by René Girard, particularly in his study of the *Book of Job* (1985). Girard highlights how, if we disregard the prologues, the lamentations of Job and his dialogue with his three friends, show him not as a victim of God, but of the society in which he lives. Job recalls that he was once a respected and influential man until his servants, relatives and friends turned away from him. He then became an object of hatred for all those, including himself, who adopted this perspective.

The polarization of violence forms a more convincing pattern than the hypothesis of pure mimetic violence developed by Girard (1972), which includes many debatable points, such as the origin of the first violent act in the absence of a model, or the idea that mimicry does not take into account inherent differences in humans, such as the physical force that distinguishes them, even if we hypothesize that desire erases social differentiation (leading, for Hindus,

10. This version was collected in western Nepal in 2000. For an analysis of the different textual versions of this myth, see *The split child*, pp. 321-68 in Doniger O'Flaherty (1988).

11. This myth recalls the mythical origin of the Shah and other royal dynasties in Nepal, in which the establishment of kingship was preceded by the degradation of a royal personage and his association with a tribal group. See Lecomte-Tilouine 2009, Chapter 6.

to the law of the fish, *matsyanyaya*). Taking into account particular social positions, such as that of Job, has the advantage of reintroducing some social reality, albeit at a very general level. It also explains very simply the convergence effect of the violence it can generate. Yet this position itself owes nothing to mimetism, which is therefore not sufficient to explain collective violence. This does not mean that mimetism is not involved in the construction of violence in various ways. Thus, Michael Taussig (1987) sees in the torture inflicted on Indians by the settlers, a 'colonial mirror' or 'a reflection' of the savagery they feared, condemned and invented; this is a theme dear to post-modernism which has recognized it in many areas, but into which the history of Nepal, which has never been colonized, does not fit.

In the case of the Nepalese People's War, mimetism clearly marked the revolutionary camp, made up of like-minded fighters and activists. But it was a dynamic set up by an organization and its leaders, not a spontaneous and collective movement of imitation. There was also strong mimetism between the character at the head of the violent group, the leader Prachanda, and the 'model-obstacle' who was the king, which grew in proportion to the detestation of the king. This was 'positional,' not 'essential' mimetism, between two individuals who were very different but placed in similar positions within rival organizations. Thus, both cases of mimicry identified in the Nepalese revolutionary movement have a source that shifts from the strongest antagonist to the 'model-obstacle,' despite the differences in caste and ideology (the revolutionary leader being Brahman, and the king, Kshatriya). In the same manner that the sacrificial killing of the model-obstacle in the myth of Vena does not come from the crowd but from the sacrificial elite, the hatred of the king in Nepal increased with the growing sovereignty of his mimetic enemy, showing the construction behind collective violence.

What is more important still is that the two major myths of origin examined here, which deal respectively with the creation of caste society and the creation of kingship, show strong parallelism by depicting a transformation of sacrificial violence into social violence. In the first case, sacrifice leads to the creation of a sacrificial social order relying on the existence of institutional scapegoats, and in the second case, to a form of class struggle (ended by ritual creation which amounts to getting rid of the tribals and to establishing a new guarantor of social subordination).

More broadly speaking, the parallelism emphasizes the causal relationship between blood sacrifice and socio-political organization. The organizing role of sacrifice, clearly outlined by Detienne and Vernant (1979) with regard to the Greek city, is therefore also essential in the Hindu context, and particularly in contemporary Nepal. This is the case not only at a mythological level but also in actual ritual practices.

The 'Sacrificial Contract' at Work

In Nepal, adult males of every group (the Brahmins excepted) are set apart by their right to kill. They represent just as many butchers, with no caste being spe-

cialized in this function like in India (or among the Newars). As for women and children (and Brahmins), they are strictly forbidden to kill, even small animals. Killing is thus strongly associated with masculinity and takes on an initiatory character. From childhood, boys aspire to be granted this responsibility and it is not uncommon to see them emphatically claim the right to kill their first chicken. This permission is granted to them by their parents once they are considered old enough not to hurt the animal, which is considered a sin, *pap*. Whoever can kill can sacrifice, in this context in which there is a very blurred distinction between killing and sacrificing, with any killing being more or less of equivalent value to a sacrifice. Indeed, it is customary to offer part of an animal to the gods even when it is beheaded for eating outside of a ritual context, or when it is killed during hunting. The sacrificial nature of killing equally exists when the victim is human: openly in the case of war, given that in the past dead bodies used to be commonly brought as offerings to temples or the enemy's blood used to fill sacred ponds. With the recent reactivation of warlike activities during the People's War, new forms of deifying the fallen emerged, such as ceremonies to honour martyrs during which their immortality is chanted. Even in the case of murder or suicide, the possibility that it might be a hidden sacrifice to accumulate power is often suspected, but not openly stated.

Whatever the context or type of victim, decapitation is the authorized form of ritual killing and any other method requires a moral or technical explanation. Similarly, in all cases, unfinished beings (children or small animals), female beings (women and female animals), as well as those associated with priesthood (Brahmins and cows) must not be killed under any circumstances, including sacrifice. These categories were also exempted from the death penalty when it was still in force. Opposite these women, children and Brahmins, who are only allowed to kill themselves and whose suicide brings forth powerful malevolent spirits, stands the horde of men of any extraction who represent just as many butchers, sacrificers and warriors, like a different aspect of the same reality, synonymous with control and masculinity. Yet the Brahmins occupy a very specific position in this setup, because if on the one hand they may be ranked within the same category as women and children regarding the power of death, they are also set apart from them by their ascetic practices which are considered to be a form of self-sacrifice. They also form the only category of people who are entitled to commit religious suicide, which does not pollute but is a way of 'quitting the world.' Furthermore, in the case of collective ceremonies, they are the ones who make the blood sacrifice possible by sanctifying the victim before it is killed – by Kshatriyas, as a rule. This feature finds its logical continuation in the fact that killing, due to its sovereign dimension, also makes kings. Sacrificial decapitation was a sort of initiation for young princes and today the sacrificial sword all covered in blood is still paraded at the end of state celebrations, as a symbol of the sovereign's alter ego. Although the sacrificial exercise is shared by all men alike, it thus falls more specifically to the Kshatriyas and among them, to their most eminent representative, the king. Furthermore, a certain hierarchy is displayed in the types of weapon used: sickles among villagers in a domestic

context, long curved knives during collective rituals and a sabre or sword in a royal context.

Given the close correspondence between masculinity, killing and the sacrificial function, animal sacrifice does not appeal to the gift of oneself, but follows a logic of warlike execution of others. In collective ceremonies, the distance maintained between the executor and the animal victim is marked by the nature of the victim, whose flesh the sacrificer cannot consume lest he become an outcast. Similarly, the sacrificial gift is not thought to be made or even accepted by the animal victim itself, which would be another disguised form of self-sacrifice. It is imperative that the animal make a sign in order for the executor to behead it: it must 'tremble,' i.e. snort after being sanctified by a libation of sacred water which is poured on its neck. But this sign marks the consent of the recipient of the gift, or the god, not that of the victim itself, suggesting that its 'trembling' characterizes possession (a sign of the presence of a divinity in the animal). This interpretation is based on two occasions on which I attended a sacrifice that could not be performed owing to the lack of a sign from the sacrificial victim, and people concluded that the animal was marred by imperfection and therefore had not been accepted by the divinity. In fact, where the deity is present, that is to say, embodied in a person who is possessed, he manifests his acceptance of the gift by touching the victim's forehead with a bell, but if he dislikes the animal, he immediately kills it by striking it with the bell.

Thus, sacrifice is a man's affair (a male affair to be more precise), with other categories excluded from both the function of executioner and the function of victim; however, the fact that it concerns fellow beings does not mean that sacrifice does not have a natural orientation, given the radical asymmetry of its interaction.

In Nepal, and especially in the western hill region that is my area of investigation, the main sacrificial ceremony is the festival of Dasain. It is also the only sacrifice that might be described as 'total' in that it is aimed, as the primordial sacrifice, at maintaining the cosmos, the socio-moral order (*dharma*), kingship, political power at all intermediate levels between the ruler and the householder, as well as all hierarchical relations within the sphere of kinship. Dasain sacrifices are performed every year in autumn. The ritual lasts for nine consecutive days during which the entire population gathers around a royal centre and performs specific tasks to celebrate the royal, warlike power in the figures of the Goddess and of deified weapons (called sword-gods, *khadka devata*). Each caste, on this annual occasion and on this occasion alone, plays a specific role, which amounts to a warlike function: Damai tailors become the drums, pipers and singers, Sarki shoemakers, the scabbard makers; Kami blacksmiths, the armourers; tribals and Kshatriyas, the soldiers; Brahmins, the priests performing the sacrifice and astrologers who set auspicious times. Outside this context, each caste carries out a different function, such as the smiths who usually forge household tools or the tailors who do sewing. Furthermore, some groups have not retained any caste speciality outside the context of the warlike Dasain sacrifice. This is the case of the warrior class, which forms by far the largest group in Nepal, especially if we

consider that the tribals are assimilated to them. Sacrifice is thus the only activity that brings together the whole of society for a joint project, sacrificial war, in which everyone participates in their own way and in their rightful place: it thus acts as the organizer of caste society.¹²

The rituals culminate in blood sacrifices, the reconfirmation of all social and political positions and subsequently war starts. This final part is now portrayed by dances with swords or by races around the sacrificial post. Yet people say that in the past, this was the beginning of a period of real war against a neighbouring kingdom, a highly institutionalized and ritualized war that regulated society. As a matter of fact, the collective celebration of Dasain is correlated with the existence of ancient kingdoms, and in the regions of eastern Nepal, where there were only tribal chiefdoms, the rituals do not represent such social cohesion. In western Nepal, there existed two main sets of kingdoms, the Chaubisi (Twenty-Four [kingdoms]) and the Baisi (Twenty-Two). Interestingly, while the rituals show internal social cohesion in the Chaubisi region, they display conflict in the neighbouring region of the Baisi. And this major difference manifests itself during the climax of the festival, which is represented by the buffalo sacrifice. This animal is associated with Mahisasura, a mythical buffalo-demon killed by the Goddess, and more generally with the negative forces that threaten society. Buffaloes are offered by anyone wishing to participate in the ritual, but at least one of them is acquired by the entire community with each member contributing equally to buying it, or it may be purchased with the local temple funds and then designated as 'governmental' or 'royal,' *sarkari* (given that temple properties are royal donations). This collectively offered buffalo is consecrated and put to death by the elite, or the two pure classes conceived as Twice-born by virtue of their initiation, the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. However, the buffalo is an unclean animal whose meat is not eaten by these upper classes or even by middle-ranking groups. The buffaloes that have been sacrificed are therefore offered as food to members of the so-called 'impure' castes. This official transaction is thus unbalanced, with some involved in sanctifying and killing the animal while others merely have the role of eating the impure remains of the offering. The sacrifice thus stages the way Hinduism is globally organized and highlights its fundamentally sacrificial order.

However, although the sacrificial ceremony does indeed unite society, ethnographic observations show that women physically distance themselves from and disapprove of the violent killing, while the lower castes often identify themselves with the victim. As I was able to observe, they take great care to ensure that decapitation takes place in due form and they may be heard to yell at the executioner if he fails to accomplish his task with one blow. In addition to these major divisions, Brahmins in some places have been heard preaching an end to animal sacrifice in accordance with their own group's ban on killing any living creature at all. Thus, sacrificial killing also highlights the internal division of

12. See Lecomte-Tilouine 2009, Chapter 7, where, in contradistinction to Hocart who viewed war as a secondary function of the king, I argue for its centrality.

the society present into distinct categories: men and women, pure and impure castes, Hindus and tribal, Brahmins and Kshatriyas.

Parallel to this most common modality of buffalo sacrifice, there exist local specificities that are particularly revealing. Whereas buffaloes are usually killed in the noblest manner, with one stroke of a sword, in some former royal capitals of the Chaubisi, such as Gorkha, their decapitation must be painful and be executed in three strokes.¹³ And in several of the Baisi former royal capitals or places of power, such as Dullu, Lulu (Kalikot) or Markhu (Achham), the killing of the buffalo is a collective massacre, which causes internal conflict between the class of warriors, who are supposed to kill the victim, and the impure castes, who try to usurp the warriors' prerogative.

In the former imperial capital of Dullu, the staging of the sacrifice of the buffalo-demon, which is portrayed in the texts as the victory of good over evil, of order over chaos, and as the renewal of royal power, offers a particularly striking interpretation. Locals say that the beheading of the buffalo is accompanied 'by the laughter of pure castes while impure castes cry,' which clearly shows their contrasting identification. This is consistent with the fact that, in many parts of Nepal and India, members of impure castes and tribal groups claim to be devotees of Ravana, the demon killed by Rama, the ideal Hindu king. Interestingly, the decapitation of buffaloes in autumn in honor of the goddess is said to have been established by Rama in order to defeat Ravana. Therefore, in a way the sacrifice stages the conflict between pure castes and their gods, on the one hand, and impure castes and their 'demons' on the other hand, suggesting that the socio-moral order (or *dharma*) is the expression of the domination of the former over the latter.

More poignantly, tribals share this perspective of the buffalo sacrifice, which they interpret even more explicitly as an expression of their domination, since they regard it as the commemoration of the 'Aryans' victory' over their own ancestors. They consider their own participation in this ritual as resulting from the particularly perverse behaviour of high-caste Hindus, who allegedly forced them to celebrate their own defeat. Indeed, the celebration of this ritual has long been mandatory for all Nepalese, while tribal organizations have been advocating its boycott ever since the advent of multiparty politics in 1990.

The perverse dimension of the sacrificial ritual, as denounced by tribal groups, affects above all the impure castes, even though, to my knowledge, the latter do not explicitly formulate this as an issue. Indeed, buffaloes, like these castes, are unclean animals whose milk and dung may not be used in rituals (as opposed to those of the cow); their meat may not be eaten by castes (or tribal groups) considered to be above the water barrier dividing pure and impure castes. Like impure castes, male buffaloes are essentially victims. Born to be beheaded during Dasain, they have no other function – except that of reproduction which is reserved for only one of them over a short period of time. Those who offer buffaloes in sacrifice make the very people they represent eat its flesh, and thus contribute to maintaining the link between these impure victims (animal

13. On the rituals in Gorkha, see Unbescheid 1996.

and human), and the reciprocity between ritual and 'social' order. This socio-religious organization is clearly political, since both impurity and excess of purity (i.e. Brahmanhood or asceticism) excludes one from political power. This was so much the case that in many stories, members of higher castes are presented as purposely offering impure food to some of their rivals to turn them into untouchables and get rid of them (politically). Similarly, a dismissed or defeated king was turned into an ascetic.

The sacrifice of the animal that embodies disorder is a gathering of the whole of society, but is nonetheless perceived in a highly contrasting manner by the different groups. Here, there is no true communion within the group, no substitution of the sacrificer by the victim, nor confusion between the victim and the deity, but a strange form of social cohesion made up of a display of differentiation and of the staging of power that keeps one section of society busy getting another section to play a role that confirms its position of victim. It is no coincidence therefore that the buffalo sacrifice is considered to be the Kshatriyas' ritual, even though it has been elevated to the status of national festival in Nepal.

Unlike textual approaches that necessarily adopt a partial view of the sacrifice, ethnographic observations can take into account a variety of perspectives on the same phenomenon. And the combined analysis of sacrifice, mixing mythical accounts of sacrifice, practices, attitudes and comments, shows that while the sacrifice acts as a social organizer in the given context, it is also indicative of that context's internal tensions and fault lines. These fault lines represent just as many focal points at which sacrifice is likely to be broken down into different practices or even, as in the People's War led by the Maoists, at which it may act to develop a system that counters the sacrificial socio-political order of the monarchy and of caste society. Interestingly, though it was clearly aggressive and directed against a pre-existent organization (which however, was itself perceived as violent), the revolutionary movement developed as a self-sacrificial form by denying the death it inflicted and by considering that the very act of engaging in the movement represented self-sacrifice. Given the movement's underlying Brahmanic sacrificial model (the sacrifice of the self), the fact that its leaders and ideologues were Brahmins is fully consistent. On the other hand, the enthusiasm that it provoked in a large section of the population is more intriguing. This suggests that in spite of its previously restricted dimension (in the modern context of Nepal), the Brahmanical *tyag*, renouncement, or 'self-sacrifice of the selfish,' had the potential to encompass sacrifice, *bali dan*, as a whole. Revealingly, this notion of *bali dan*, which was previously understood as and used to designate animal sacrifice or the sacrifice of the other, came to mean self-sacrifice with the People's war. Thus the Brahmanical renouncement or model of sacrifice developed rapidly in all sectors of society only when it fitted into a warlike framework that kept intact two main features of the very sacrificial organization that the movement was fighting against: its faculty to divide humans into categories, making a part of them the victims of the other part to form an antagonistic dynamics, and its denial of its own violence. The counter-nature of this new movement is borne out by the fact that, while deploying their

own 'total sacrifice,' revolutionaries strictly forbade animal sacrifice and even threatened to sacrifice the disobedient.

Conclusive Remarks

In this exploration of sacrifice in the Hindu context of Nepal, I have come across strong parallelism in the mythical accounts that describe the capacity of sacrifice to give birth to generalized, social forms of violence. This capacity is not only restricted to discourse, especially mythical, but may also be observed during Hindu sacrifice as it unfolds during the national festival of Dasain where, in a seemingly exact reproduction of the myths about the origins of society and of kingship, sacrifice organizes hierarchical caste society and initiates war. Here sacrifice is antagonistic in nature, although this dimension is displayed to varying degrees in different local contexts, in the same manner that caste organization is antagonistic, although this aspect has been fully ignored by most of its specialists.¹⁴ All this coherence is certainly not due to an accumulation of coincidences or a careful selection of the facts, but may be put down to the representation of power that is at play in sacrifice.

I would therefore readily describe sacrifice as a system of tension representing the legitimate violence inherent to any social organization, and whose transcendent necessity is displayed in the public killing of a being. This definition of sacrifice goes far beyond the Nepalese and Hindu setting which has served here as a guide, because many sacrifices are accompanied by extreme social tension and a division of the group, part of which identifies with the victim, such as (to take very well-known examples) the sacrifice of Christ, or that of Iphigenia and the series of murders it triggered. Sacrifice therefore exposes internal social violence, or the violence of the group inflicted on itself, that is, to be more precise, of the dominant group over the others; an exposure that acts as a test in that it crudely and cruelly displays the normally hidden or naturalized asymmetry of the relations that constitute the group.¹⁵ The violence of such exposure does not serve as a catharsis, but as the ultimate test of group belonging, explaining why it can also apply to contexts of war. In Nepal, once the legitimate violence of one over the other had been ritually exposed, accepted and deified, the reunified group led an equally violent and sacrificial campaign, but directed at an outside entity, the neighbouring kingdom. The stability this double movement ensures, the first containing in germ the language and structure of the second, recalls Malamoud's remarks about sacrifice in ancient India: that man does not have the duty to 'perform,' but 'to deploy' (1985). The People's War took its vocabulary from the warlike royal sacrifice, but combined it with the Brahmanic model of self-sacrifice. And it is ultimately this last model which, in the context

14. On the antagonistic nature of caste organization, see B eteille 1992.

15. In a certain manner, this is also true of sacrifice within the domestic sphere, in which male elders put to death goats cherished by the women and children of the household. They sometimes react so violently against the idea that the householder is obliged to sell his goat and buy another one for the sacrifice.

of Nepal was assimilated and taken to the extreme, providing the global logic of the revolutionary movement, which was presented as a vast endeavour of purification led by self-sacrificial warriors to eradicate a feudal system in which the sacrifice of others was the engine and the mark of possessing power. In the same manner that the sacrificial nucleus of the buffalo sacrifice had this ability to grow into ritual war, the People's War developed from a sacrificial model hitherto restricted to individual asceticism and the ideal of a non-hierarchical society made up of ascetics. Although utopian as such, the model indeed existed not only in theory but also as an absolute value towards which exceptional individuals tended: it endowed its righteous absoluteness on the movement in order to oppose and designate as violent the sacrificial organization of caste society and the monarchy that ensured its regulation and perpetuation. The movement harshly criticized the sacrifice of the other administered by the king at state rituals, magnified in his war against the revolutionaries. The second, generalized form of violence was indeed assimilated to the first, ritual and restricted form of sacrifice by the rebels, who advocated the supreme legitimacy of self-sacrifice to defeat this system, without considering that it could be an indirect form of sacrificing others, by enticing them onto such a self-sacrificial path.

The complex construction that produced the Maoists would merit a separate study. Nevertheless, it is certain that although the two models of sacrificial violence finally recovered their circumscribed forms and were re-transposed to certain ritual occasions, particular places and symbolic forms, they preserved their ability to expand and to act as a metaphor for the entire social and political fields as putative sacrificial areas. In both cases, sacrifice does indeed constitute the foundation of violent organization, and the main feature of the context under study is that it has developed and promoted in parallel two sacrificial logics, which are almost opposites but may be associated in different ways in a powerful combinatorial alchemy.

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