Sacrifices gone wrong

Precautions, consequences, damage control

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In many cultures, sacrifices are such an important aspect of the social life, that their ratio has been widely scrutinized and subjected to innumerable theories. In my paper I will tackle the problem from the viewpoint of the possible failure of the ritual. All human actions can go wrong, of course, but the failure of a sacrifice can be so dangerous that the rules of its performance constitute no less than an entire science; in ancient Vedic religion, in particular, the sheer amount of texts concerning the exact circumstances, modalities, instruments etc. which must be considered before undertaking the ritual is evidence of the seriousness of the issue and of the fear that something might go wrong. We find very similar concerns in ancient Greek and Latin documents, which confirm that in sacrificial cultures, in spite of their deep differences, the components of the ritual have to be carefully handled in order to avoid catastrophic consequences. In animal sacrifice, of course, a considerable part of the precautions regard how the victims must be handled and killed. As many indologists have argued, it is possible that the notion of *ahiṃsā* itself arises within this context, as a way of ensuring that, by not "really" harming the animal, its immolation will cause no harm to the sacrificer and, more generally, to the community. My paper will deal respectively with: 1) the precautions to be taken beforehand; 2) the imagined consequences of a failure; 3) the means through which these consequences can be "fixed". The analysis might give some insights about the way in which the Indian sacrificial religion has shaped the relationship between humans and animals, which is, in its turn, a relevant part of the ethical assumptions operating in that part of the world.

Keywords: failed sacrifices, sociological efficacy of sacrifices, unanimity in rites, comedy of innocence, ambivalence of blood in religion.

1. Foreword[1]

The present paper considers the problem of failed sacrifices from a sociological viewpoint; assuming with Durkheim that the only 'real' thing happening in a religious rite are the gathering of people, the material preparation of the performance and its effects on the community, I will examine how a failure can be prevented, which reasons may lead to a negative judgment about the efficacy of the rite during its performance and, finally, which remedies can be used to control the damage afterwards.

2. Sacrifice and its failure

In many cultures sacrifices are such an important aspect of the social life that their ratio has been widely scrutinized and subjected to innumerable theories. All religions devote a great deal of attention to the exceptional benefits that can be drawn from the correct performance of a sacrifice. Not only it guarantees all kinds of prosperity and good luck to the community, but it also has a cosmic role in keeping all things in the proper order; without its periodic renewal, all human activities would be at risk: pregnant women would not bear healthy children, the soil would be sterile, war actions would fail and the very own structure of society would be 'out of joint.' All the ancient cultures of the world agree on the paramount importance of this ritual, no matter the many forms it assumes. Such is the importance of sacrifices that a particular group of people (generally men, but there are exceptions) benefits from a higher social status due to their deep knowledge of the ways of sacrifices. The brahmins, notwithstanding their political and military inferiority with respect to the *kṣatriya*, succeeded in maintaining the highest position in the Indian social system because they were believed to be the only ones who could perform sacrifices in the right way; their knowledge was the result of a long period of study and was committed to written texts in order to avoid the loss of the means that keep society together.

I will tackle the problem from a particular viewpoint: the possible failure of the ritual. All human actions can go wrong, of course, but the failure of a sacrifice is considered so dangerous that in some cultures it requires no less than an entire science to get hold of the matter; the lifelong activity of a class of young men, the Vedic students, is devoted to the study of ample treatises. Those who aspired to become respected brahmins had to undergo long years of preparation, both intellectual and moral.

[1] This research was made possible thanks to the financial support of Next Generation EU – Line M4.C2.1.1 – PRIN 2022, project "For a Multivocal History of the Attitudes Towards Non-Human Animals in South Asia. Ethics, Practices, Symbolism. Investigating New and Unsolved Issues," CUP G53D23004630006.

The sheer amount of texts concerning the exact circumstances, modalities and instruments which must be taken into consideration before undertaking the ritual is proof of the seriousness of it all and of the fear that something might go wrong if fallen in the hand of unworthy or unprepared people. We find very similar concerns in ancient Greek and Latin documents, which confirms that in all sacrificial cultures, in spite of their deep differences, the components of the ritual have to be carefully handled in order to avoid catastrophic consequences.

Let us consider, for example, the case of a failed sacrifice in ancient Rome; Livy writes that, at the beginning of the year 176 BCE, one of the prescribed rituals went wrong: "when the consuls Cn. Cornelius and Q. Petilius were making animal sacrifice to Jupiter with an ox each, as was customary, a head was not found on the liver of the victim with which Petilius had made sacrifice. When he announced this to the senate, he was ordered to obtain *litatio* with an(other?) ox" (Livy, 41,14). As one might expect, the means through which bad consequences can be 'fixed' is the repetition of the sacrifice until *litatio* (i.e. the acceptance of the victims by the gods) is obtained. In Roman times, the signs of a successful sacrifice were obtained by "observing the behaviour of the animal while it was alive and walking towards the altar, and by examining the condition of the animal's entrails (*exta*) once it had been killed" (Driediger-Murphy 2019, para. 1). Soon after the Senate's order to repeat Petilius's sacrifice, the other consul announced that his sacrifice had failed, too: "Cornelius returned not long after with a troubled expression and explained to the senators that the liver of the *sescenaris* ox which he had sacrificed had melted away [during cooking]" (Livy, 41,14). The senators were terrified by this prodigy, but no solution was found: even at the end of the repetitions, one god at least, *Salus*, refused to accept the victims. Driediger-Murphy interprets Livy's narration as proof that Roman divinatory sacrifice was not an easy matter, as the desired outcome could not always be obtained simply by trying again and again. The gods could be stubbornly hostile, no matter how many times the officiants repeated their action in the best possible way, and the consequences were appalling. As Driediger-Murphy wittily remarks by quoting a passage from Rebecca West's *The birds fall down*, the notion that "Romans had sufficient insensibility to make them happy pagans [...]. The Greeks proved themselves greater by being wretched in their paganism" should be reconsidered. Seneca's *Oedipus* is a striking example of the horror that could come out as a result of a failed sacrifice in the Latin world; Manto's description of the killing of a bull to her blind father Tiresias heavily insists on this:

> Father, what is this? With no gentle motion, as is their wont, do the entrails shake and quiver, but my whole hand do they cause to tremble and blood spurts afresh from the veins. The heart, diseased through and through, is withered and lies deep hidden, and the reins are of livid hue. A great part of the entrails is wanting, and from the rotting liver black gall oozes forth, and see—ever fatal omen

> for sole sovereignty—two heads rise side by side with equal bulge; yet each cloven head is hidden in but thin membrane, refusing a lurking place to secret things [...]. Nature is subverted; even the womb follows not its law. Let us look close and see whence comes this stiffness in the entrails. What monstrosity is this? A foetus in an unmated heifer! nor does it lie in accustomed fashion, but fills its mother in an unnatural place. Moaning it moves its limbs, and its weak members twitch with convulsive rigors. Livid gore has stained the entrails black. The sadly mangled forms essay to move, and one disembowelled body strives to rise and menaces the priests with its horns; the entrails flee from my hand (Seneca, *Oedipus*, 353 ff.).

As far as Greeks are concerned, a tragedy like Euripides's *Heracles* abundantly shows how the benefits expected from a sacrifice can be reversed into a horrible nightmare:

> Victims to purify the house were stationed before the altar of Zeus, for Heracles had slain and cast from his halls the king of the land. There stood his group of lovely children, with his sire and Megara; and already the basket was being passed round the altar, and we were keeping holy silence. But just as Alcmena's son was bringing the torch in his right hand to dip it in the holy water, he stopped without a word. And as their father lingered, his children looked at him; and lo! he was changed; his eyes were rolling; he was distraught; his eyeballs were bloodshot and starting from their sockets, and foam was oozing down his bearded cheek. Anon he spoke, laughing the while a madman's laugh. [...] Hunting the child round and round, the column, in dreadful circles, and coming face to face with him shot him to the heart; and he fell upon his back, sprinkling the stone pillars with blood as he gasped out his life. Then did Heracles shout for joy [...]. Against a second did he aim his bow, who had crouched at the altar's foot thinking to escape unseen. But [Heracles] with savage Gorgon-scowl, as the child now stood in range of his baleful archery, smote him on the head, as smites a smith his molten iron, bringing down his club upon the fair-haired boy, and crushed the bones (Euripides, *Herakles*, 923-ff.).

Just like all human activities, there is only one thing to be done in rituals too, in case of failure: inspect the causes, try and modify the circumstances of its performance. Of course, one could end up rejecting the rules themselves, leading to a complete paradigm-shift; but, in order for this to happen, the community should have experienced a total collapse of their beliefs. Moreover, what can you do if there is no other way of solving a problem than to follow the ancient prescriptions? In order to give up a respected tradition, you should have a better substitute. When, say, a bridge crashes down, we do not renounce to architectural science altogether, but rather we try to correct the mistakes in their application which *have to be* the cause of the disaster. Ancient cultures had only very few ways of controlling their own well-being, which depended on the weather, on the appearance of a disease and so on; therefore, they generally stayed on a known path in spite of occasional failures, repeating sacrifices and checking for possible faults in their performance.

But what are the consequences of a failure, exactly? And are they only imaginary or is there a very concrete social 'fallout'? There are two possible ways of answering these questions: the first comes from the traditional beliefs or, so to say, from the 'theology' expressed in the myth and in the accepted

corpus of religious texts. What the texts suggest is simply that the prosperity of the community hangs on the acceptance of the human gifts by the gods; this is something which sacrificial cultures state as obvious and which is presented as the main reason why rituals must be performed. In the Indian culture there is also a strong emphasis on the fact that a good sacrifice ensures the sacrificer a good existence in the afterlife, rewarding him for their piety. But the expected negativity is not apparent at once; it can manifest itself after a long time, leaving the community wondering whether the gods have accepted their act of piety. The benefits can be immediately taken as real only by a community deeply settled in their beliefs. I am not going to propose a naive confutation of the efficacy of sacrifices from the standpoint of a modern, skeptical culture; I rather suggest, along the traces of Durkheim's and Girard's theories, that an instant benefit really exists, only it is not the one the religion supposes. The second way of answering the above questions, therefore, considers as only real benefit the satisfaction of social needs, such as confidence in the future, social cohesion and renewed motivation to accept the submission to all profane duties. If we follow this path, we can see that, in the end, the success or the failure of a sacrifice can be determined only by the people who attend the ritual. It is them who decide whether to expect patiently a good outcome or to put into doubt the work of the sacrificers.

The relevance of the sacrifice techniques in the ancient Vedic texts and the amount of detailed indications in that literature has made India the case-study for excellence in all theories regarding this now enigmatic institution. It is no surprise that Hubert and Mauss took the Indian religion as the principal source out of which a general theory could be sketched; of course, the comparison with ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew rituals was widely practiced but a great amount of the main theoretical works on sacrifice rests on a solid foundation of Vedic prescriptions, tales and examples. A possible exception is René Girard, whose theory of sacrifice is developed mainly from Greek literature, though he considers Indian literature more closely in *Le sacrifice*. Differently from Hubert and Mauss, he does not consider communication with the gods the goal of the ritual; instead, he thinks that its main function is the repetition of an originary lynching which unexpectedly provided a sudden interruption of the rivalry within the group. Through the expulsion of a surrogate victim, the sacrifice channels the internal violence through institutionalized operations instead of letting it spread in the community. A few aspects are worth noticing: according to Girard (who renews Durkheim's sociological explanation of religion), the center of the religious action is not the altar or the priests but, rather, the audience. It is for them that the ritual killing is staged and it is they who are, in the end, the real judges of its performance. We shall try to apply this perspective to Vedic sacrifice in order to understand one of its most characteristic aspects, that is the extremely detailed prescriptions for its staging.

3. The role of the audience

Sacrifice is a public thing: it takes place in front of many people, who are emotionally involved in what is happening on the stage. The authority of the priests vanishes if there is no social consensus; but how can they ensure that the believers accept their superiority? A possible way is to enshrine the performance of the rites in a quite complex number of rules. Like the Athenian tragedy, whose similarity to ritual immolations has been masterly revealed by Girard's works, sacrifice has to obey exact prescriptions, which, in Vedic religion, are particularly minute. The technicalities of the ritual guarantee a certain amount of passivity in the believers, which consider the whole operation as something requiring a higher knowledge and a life-long dedication to their understanding. Its frequent repetition, though, allows the believers to know a certain number of details about what should happen; expectations are very high, if we consider that the welfare of the community itself is at stake. It is likely then that some of the people who attend are not entirely passive toward the operation; moreover, the preparation of the ritual begins many days in advance and people are not completely unaware of the ways of this crucial phase. They have opinions about the officiant, about those who assist him and about the instruments or the place where it will happen. It is reported that a ceremony taking place in an Indian community living in South America was raising eyebrows even before its performance, because the officiant would wear a Superman T-shirt during the days of the preparation (Moura Mello 2020). The ensuing failure of the ritual (the goat was not killed with a single blow) was somehow anticipated by a community already prone, in this particular case, to doubt the worthiness of the officiant. Success or failure may be the outcome of rivalries within the believers, as it happens with all kinds of staged performances; since the supposed benefits of a sacrifice cannot be evaluated the second it ends, it is obvious that the role of the audience is decisive. This is true of many other religious rites, otherwise it could not be understood why, notwithstanding their tendency to crystallization and the obvious desire of priests for continuity, rituals change in time. The brahmins themselves could not ignore any change in people's expectations, lest they risked their status. One of the reasons why sacrifice in India underwent such spectacular changes, from the ancient Vedic times to the later abstention from animal-killing, might therefore be found in a change in common people's expectations: in spite of their superior knowledge and their social rank, the work of the brahmins was under the scrutiny of many eyes.

Unanimity is paramount, since the pacification of the community is nothing else than the shared belief that all evil has been purified; just like the *katharsis* in the Greek tragedy must descend upon all the people in the theatre, the good outcome of a sacrifice rests on the absence of dissonant opinions. Of course, sacrifice does not solve all the problems of the community once and forever: it has to be

repeated, because new events can make rivalries appear once again. Sacrifices are generally classified, according to their timing, in three categories:

1. on established days of the year, in order to ensure a lasting positive effect through ritual gatherings;
2. in special occasions, like weddings, funerals, births and so on, which happen on a regular basis but that cannot be predicted in advance;
3. in very special situations, such as when a danger suddenly appears (a war, famine, drought...).

The ratio, yet, is always the same: to strengthen social cohesion when it is shaken by potentially troubling situations.

If the supposed benefits of a sacrifice cannot be immediately ascertained, the social ones can; if people leave the site of the ritual in good order, feeling a renewed confidence in the future, then the ceremony has fulfilled its real purpose: of course, the believers will think that this is the effect of the benevolence of the gods, who have accepted the offering and have appreciated the spirit in which it was given. Praise will go to the pious and skillful officiants, who have been capable of establishing once again a positive contact with the higher beings of the universe, to their own and the whole community's advantage. The only proof of a successful sacrifice is, therefore, the satisfaction of the attending people; any uneasiness will be seen as a failure, due to the insufficient moral or technical worthiness of the people who staged the ceremony.

4. The handling of the victims

In animal sacrifice, of course, a considerable part of the precautions regards how the victims must be handled and killed. As many Indologists have argued, it is possible that the notion of *ahiṃsā* itself arises within this context, as a way of ensuring that, by not 'really' harming the animal, its immolation will cause no harm to the sacrificer and, more generally, to the community. If we take the viewpoint of the audience, this means that, at a certain point in history, the believers could have not been unanimous anymore in their approval of a cruel rite: violence against animals might have been felt as something which prevents the good outcome of the ceremony.

In India, the abstention from animal killing in rites, as is well known, has been preceded by a long period of minimization of the cruelty involved in rites; the euphemistic jargon, the use of suffocation instead of cutting, the subtraction of the immolation from the eyes of the public are all part of what has been called by Karl Meuli (Burkert 1972) *Unschuldigkeitskomödie*; such ruses (often undecipherable), are present in many cultures and have always left the historians of religion puzzled: a Babylonian text

quoted by Burkert relates the sacrificer's words in front of the severed skull of a sacrificed bull: "this deed has been committed by all the gods, not by me" (Burkert 1972, ch. 10).

There are at least two quite different ways to explain them: according to Burkert, who makes ample use of Freudian notions, they display the guilt of the killers; but this merely psychological explanation fails to clarify why a pious action, performed according to all the traditional rules, should be judged as morally wrong. On the contrary, Girard, intends it as the result of fear of possible retaliations. A famous Indian text seems to support the latter position, as Pieruccini remarks:

> Un modo in cui il timore delle conseguenze si esprime è l'immagine di un 'mondo rovesciato' che attende nell'aldilà, dove gli uomini subiranno lo stesso destino che hanno inflitto; in particolare, saranno mangiati da chi hanno mangiato. Quest'idea, che affiora qui e là in testi vedici e finanche in Manu, è illustrata al meglio dalla vicenda di Bhṛgu, figlio del dio Varuṇa, il quale nell'altro mondo vede uomini uccisi e divorati da altri esseri umani che impersonano quelli che un tempo erano alberi, animali, piante e acque. Per quanto la visione di Bhṛgu, com'è in generale accettato dagli studiosi, non appaia suscitata da preoccupazioni etiche, ma si inquadri piuttosto in un arcaico tentativo di attribuire una sorta di simmetria fra questo mondo e l'aldilà, è evidente che essa apre prospettive spaventevoli, di autentico orrore (Pieruccini 2019, ch. 3).

The theology of sacrifice, *i.e.* the attribution of the violence to the gods, is essential to the promotion of social pacification, since it allows the distinction of the violence of the rite from the everyday violence. The killing of the victim is sacred, which means it is completely separated from profane life; the blood which is shed in the immolation purifies the human rivalries' 'bad blood.' But the operation is risky: if it is not performed in the excruciatingly detailed ways prescribed by the tradition, the bad blood can pollute the entire society. If the officiants don't *seem* to be obeying a superior will with absolute certainty, they would automatically be considered butchers, not holy men. Sacrifice is an institutionalized violence, apparently imposed by a higher being: "in the primitive ritual view, sacrifice fights violence not with ordinary violence [...] with a *good* violence that seems and therefore *is* mysteriously different form the *bad* violence" (Girard 1990: 214). This explains the paradoxical ambivalence of blood, good if shed in the rite, bad if shed in common life; it is exactly the very ambivalence of the sacred, of which the blood is the concrete manifestation.

As far as Indian religion is concerned, it may then be argued that the progressive abstention from animal killing is a strategy aimed at erasing any trace of responsibility in the officiants, since a violent action, if committed *by* the officiants and not merely *through* them, would compromise the good outcome of the sacrifice, already menaced by the fear of retaliation. It was relatively easy to replace living victims with surrogates, since the very nature of sacrifice is, by definition, the substitution of the originary victim with a different one. By giving well-argued reasons to explain this great turn in

the religious practice, like the respect for life, and by engraving such new prescription in the accepted texts, the brahmins managed to maintain a relative continuity to their beliefs and to avoid any confusion between bad and good blood.

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