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Sacrifice as pervasive metaphor and creative principle: on Marie Lecomte-Tilouine's *Sacrifice et Violence*

Le sacrifice, métaphore omniprésente et principe créateur : à propos de Sacrifice et Violence de Marie Lecomte Tilouine

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- 1 In a sense this is the book Marie Lecomte-Tilouine has been waiting all her career to write. Invited as an honoured guest on her very first visit to Nepal to see the bloody sacrifices of Dasain, confronted with sacrificial practices everywhere she went over the following decades of field research, it is a subject she has written on in many contexts already (as well as co-editing the important comparative collection, *Célébrer le pouvoir: Dasain, une fête royale au Népal*, 1996). As one would expect from such a prolific anthropologist with so many years of experience, the new book is rich in ideas and ethnographic examples. In the first place, it is a detailed exposition and analysis of sacrifice, both as practice and as idea, going all the way from domestic and village-level goat and buffalo sacrifices through state-organised Dasain celebrations to the self-conscious (and, to a degree, instrumental) use of the idea and ideology of sacrifice by Maoist revolutionaries. At the same time, *Sacrifice et Violence* is shot through with detailed consideration of, as well as arguments with, the anthropological and Indological classics: Hubert and Mauss, of course, but also Biardeau, Malamoud, Staal, Girard, and de Heusch. We meet also the rather less well-known figure of François-Philippe Mésenguy, abbot of Beauvais in the 18th century, who wrote an analysis of sacrifice in the Catholic tradition.
- 2 Combined with these thinkers are the opinions and accounts of numerous ordinary Nepalis whom Lecomte-Tilouine has known over several decades of field research. These include a Brahmin woman who explains the caste order by pointing to different parts of her body (p97-8) and a Chhetri man, whose long recorded dialogue with the

Dalit medium of the god Bhurulle Bhairav in Dullu illustrates well the tensions around social inclusion and exclusion in the worship of lineage and territorial gods (pp149–52). She relates also the dilemma of a high-caste female medium in Pokhara (pp29–30) who offers blood sacrifice to her tutelary deity, Kalika, as instructed, but worries about the fact that she cannot offer a buffalo, since she would then have to consume its blessed meat, which would pollute her. Finally, there is the villager in his fifties (caste not specified) who told her: ‘When one has never offered a blood sacrifice, it’s like never having had sex with a girl: you want to know what it is like. And when you have done it, you feel the same as when you have had sex. It is shameful to speak of sexual matters, but I have to say that the effect is the same’ (pp137–8). The ethnography in Chapter 5, describing the underlying patterns and local variations in the many different locales in west Nepal where Lecomte-Tilouine has observed the Dasain festival, and in Chapter 7, on Maoism, is particularly rich.

- 3 Some well-known ethnographers who have written about sacrifice and anti-sacrifice in the Nepalese context do not make an appearance, eg Macdonald, Levy, Bennett, Toffin, Mumford, Holmberg, Pfaff-Czarnecka, Owens, Campbell, Hangen, Ramirez, Letizia, Mocko, Shneiderman, Zotter, Zharkevich – and doubtless there are others whom I have overlooked (for which my apologies). Axel Michaels gets a couple of citations, but not for his work on sacrifice (likewise de Sales, on revolutionary songs). It is a particular pity that space could not be found for Mumford's *Himalayan Dialogue* (1989), because the question of whether to sacrifice or not lies at the heart of the book. There is by now a whole library on Nepal's civil war and there was perhaps no need to refer to much of it; still, it is surprising to see ignored a major history that, like *Sacrifice et Violence*, makes good use of Nepali-language sources, namely, Aditya Adhikari's *The Bullet and the Ballot Box: The story of Nepal's Maoist revolution* (2014). A consideration of these scholars' work could have enriched still further the discussion both of how sacrifice is deeply embedded in Nepalese society and of how it has, increasingly, been contested.
- 4 Lecomte-Tilouine's style – subtle, aphoristic, suggestive, always alive to symbolic links, inversions and paradoxes – reflects the density and richness of the ideas. (It is a pity that there is no index.) There are too many aphorisms to list, though I was tempted to start such a list, if only to have a ready supply of interesting and provocative quotations for future exam questions. A translation into English is certainly a desideratum, both for Himalayan Studies and for anthropology generally, but, to do the text justice, it would need to be done sensitively via a thorough rethinking of the ideas at their deepest level. Any one sentence can be rendered adequately by well-known AI-generated algorithms. However, my guess is that, for the book as a whole, certain key passages would either emerge as gobbledygook or at least would fail to convey the intended train of thought.
- 5 Any ambitious ethnographically informed overview of this sort has to grapple with the extent of social and cultural change in Nepal. One aspect of this is that, since 1951, the cultural gap between different groups has narrowed considerably (and it would be a mistake to assume that there was no mutual influence before then – on the contrary). Before the 1964 replacement of the 1854 national law code a Bahun (Brahmin) who took up the plough risked losing his caste. Bahun peasants (as most of them were and still are) were obliged to employ a ploughman, usually a Dalit, to plough their fields. That all changed with the ‘ploughing revolution’ (*halo kranti*) social movement in Lamjung, Kaski, and Tanahun districts in 1949 (Risal VS 2076) – a campaign to encourage Bahuns

to plough, which at the time was indeed revolutionary, though they now do it, routinely, with no fear of outcasting. Lecomte-Tilouine insists on the Hindu norm that Bahuns, women, and children should never kill or sacrifice, or be killed (pp56, 140, 142). However, it is a fact that Bahuns have started to sacrifice animals by their own hand (I have personally seen a Bahun slaughter a chicken, and another sacrifice a pigeon). The idea that Brahmins, as a category, should not do so, remains, but social practice has moved on. In other words, there has been a huge secularisation of the status of Bahuns; they are no longer 'gods on earth', just as for most Nepalis today and in the recent past, the idea that the King of Nepal was Vishnu was something of an uneasy joke (Mocko 2016: 6).

- 6 Even before such modernising influences, the status and role of Brahmins was highly flexible. There were Brahmins who became kings. There were Brahmins who became large landowners. There were Brahmins who became soldiers. I am reminded of a conversation I once had with Father John Locke, who recalled a conversation he had once had with a former student, a Bahun. The former student was explaining that Bahuns were both teetotal and strict about what meat they would eat. Father Locke remarked, 'Didn't I see you eating buff momos and drinking whisky the other day?' To which the answer was, 'But I don't drink *as a Bahun*'. The point Father Locke wanted to convey to me was that in South Asian thought collective concepts could have qualities even if the particulars that fell under them lacked them. The Platonic concept of 'Brahmin' remained pure and unaffected by the behaviour of actual living Brahmins.
- 7 Lecomte-Tilouine's argument is that, to a significant extent, sacrifice in Nepal is a master trope, a metaphor that pervades the culture. She shows how the gift of a daughter in marriage (*kanyadan*) is assimilated to sacrifice; she also indicates how the marriage, from the girl's point of view, is a kind of first funeral. War is a kind of sacrifice, warriors have to be willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good; sacrifice is equally therefore a kind of war. Early and unexpected deaths are often interpreted as sacrifices demanded by the goddess.
- 8 Just as the idea of sacrifice is pervasive, contestation of sacrifice is likewise a major theme, taken up in Chapter 5. Contestation comes from very different directions. There is the opposition of those who are opposed religiously to sacrifice. There is the opposition of Janajati ('indigenous nationality') and Dalit (former 'Untouchable') activists, who object to the subordinate roles that Janajatis and Dalits are prescribed in the Hindu sacrificial division of labour. And then there is the more recent opposition of vegetarians and animal-rights activists, who object to animal sacrifice. They have made the five-yearly Gadhimai festival in the Tarai near India, where thousands of buffaloes and other animals are slaughtered, into a *cause célèbre*.
- 9 Lecomte-Tilouine was a leading and is probably the most prolific member of what might be called the French school of Maoism-Interpretation. Along with Philippe Ramirez (1997), Anne de Sales (2003) and others, she led the way in the interpretation of Nepalese Maoism as a religiously inspired messianic movement. She edited the most comprehensive collective volume on the subject, *Revolution in Nepal: An anthropological and historical approach to the People's War* (2013). Chapter 7 of *Sacrifice et Violence*, 'Self-sacrifice against sacrifice in the revolutionary struggle', takes up these themes, which she has tackled before, but with new material, new Nepali sources on death impurity (or lack of it) in wartime, and so on. There is, so far as I can tell, very little cutting and

pastings from earlier publications (she re-uses only a couple of the striking Maoist poems from her essay on martyrdom as generative sacrifice, Lecomte-Tilouine 2006).

- 10 Thanks to her extensive study of Maoist literary productions, Lecomte-Tilouine is able to reveal the existence of 'a veritable mysticism of violence and death...a Maoist mysticism [which] opens up a new level of reality that, thanks to its intermediary position, evokes the ritual domain' (pp236–7). The followers of this new cult became like renouncers, dead to the social world, living corpses (*jiundo las*), happy to see themselves as martyrs in a great cause. Following the royal massacre of June 2001, they found themselves opposed to a king who was addicted to animal sacrifices at goddess shrines throughout the subcontinent. Small wonder that the Maoists accused King Gyanendra, 'the butcher', of sacrificing his brother and other family members and called on him to sacrifice himself for the sake of the nation.
- 11 Interviews with former Maoist cadres permit Lecomte-Tilouine to supplement Maoist representations with a phenomenology of being in the movement. It is indeed an experience of constant movement but also, for the newly recruited, of – at first – deep ignorance of where one is being taken:
- Dhruwa's account describes an initiatory journey into a parallel world where every movement is controlled by an invisible power according to a plan known only to it... Gradually, each of the new recruits is granted control over a small area, thanks to the multiplication of positions of authority... The party members end by reproducing their own experience among the people, who are either abducted or forcibly nominated for party positions, thereby losing control of their individual destiny and becoming an involuntary member of the Maoist community. (pp274–5)
- 12 In a study this ambitious in scope it is perhaps not surprising that there are some lacunae. Lecomte-Tilouine barely mentions the South Asian critiques of sacrifice that go back two and a half millennia. The negation of sacrifice is summed up in the term *ahimsa* -- conventionally translated 'non-violence', etymologically it means 'absence of desire to kill' -- which is hailed as the highest dharma by Buddhists and Jains. There is, so far as I can see, only one brief mention of Buddhism in the whole book. In short, the critique of animal sacrifice has been deep and long-lasting, both from outside of Hinduism (from Buddhism and Jainism) and from within (from Vaishnavism). The influence of Buddhism, Jainism, and Vaishnavism on Brahmanism is undoubtedly profound in this regard (both as to vegetarianism and as to sacrifice).
- 13 On a narrower scale, it is also an exaggeration to say that there was no criticism or pressure on the issue in Nepal before 1990 (pp15, 94, 195). In 1923 the Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher organised a week-long debate between a pandit he had invited from Banaras and traditionalist Brahmins, led by Hemraj Pandey, the rajguru. Hemraj defended the traditionalist view that animal sacrifice should be made to the lineage god (*kul devata*). At the end of the debate, Chandra Shamsher declared himself satisfied with Hemraj's arguments and gave permission for whoever so wished to continue with animal sacrifice. However, although public sacrifices would continue, he himself and his family, in their private worship, would henceforth substitute vegetables, as permitted by scripture. 'The predictions that Chandra would succumb to the wrath of the Shakti and perish within a year proved baseless' (Rana 2018: 72). In 1956 in response to Buddhist representations animal sacrifice was banned throughout the kingdom on the day of Buddha Jayanti (LeVine and Gellner 2005: 58) — though admittedly the ban was more symbolic than real. Finally, on the issue of the Janajati

boycott of Dasain, it is hardly possible to give a full and adequate account without referring to Susan Hangen's *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal* (2010).

- 14 Hubert and Mauss's position, that there is a universal underlying schema of sacrifice (which is precisely to be distinguished from simple offerings, as Lecomte-Tilouine explains, by the destruction, or at least transformation, of what is offered), is contrasted with later developments in anthropology, which tended to reject the idea that sacrifice represents any kind of universal category (p61). For example, anthropologists frequently criticise the use of the term 'sacrifice' in Asia as the illegitimate extension and imposition of Christian ideas.
- 15 So, in conclusion, is Lecomte-Tilouine advancing a single theory of sacrifice, as Hubert and Mauss did on the basis of the Hindu and Hebrew examples? It would seem not, as she opens her conclusion by declaring that sacrifice is 'a singularity, in other words, it resists analysis (*se dérobe à l'analyse*) and can only be understood by means of the relationships in which it is entangled' (p285). Nevertheless, her conclusions – at least about sacrifice in Nepal – are as follows:
1. Violence is central to sacrifice (de Heusch's scorn for Girard notwithstanding); those who oppose the killing of animals fail to grasp that it is the act of violence that makes sacrifice effective and creative; this is the 'contradictory principle' at the heart of the phenomenon: 'it destroys in order to create'.
 2. Yet, in one of many paradoxes, in sacrificial ideology the denial of violence is simultaneously present, alongside its glorification, as far back as the Vedic writings analysed by Malamoud (pp72-3).
 3. Sacrificial violence is Janus-headed: it both 'unifies and divides, includes and excludes' simultaneously; and it induces people (Untouchables, women) to acquiesce in their own subordination, through the inherent violence of social organisation.
 4. War is modelled on sacrifice and is a form of sacrifice writ large, so that, vice versa, sacrifice is a 'mini war'; caste as a division of labour is based on warlike functions even more than it is on more mundane specialisations.
 5. The high point of sacrificial violence is revolutionary war, which does away with the substitutions (goat for sacrificer) conventionally made.
 6. The Maoist movement represented a huge transfiguration, a transvaluation even, of the ideology of sacrifice, turning it on its head and directing it against the king, who became a kind of demon figure, a Ravana opposed to the Ram-like Maoist leader Prachanda.
- 16 These conclusions about Nepal have been prefigured in Lecomte-Tilouine's earlier writings but are nowhere so powerfully brought together as in this book. Whether these conclusions can be the basis for analyses of sacrifice elsewhere or, rather, whether the 'singularity' of sacrifice will resist such readings, will be food for discussion for years to come. Among those who have tried to generalise about sacrifice recently are Bloch (1992), briefly referred to here, as well as Jay (1992) and Marvin and Ingle (1999). Meanwhile, Lecomte-Tilouine's striking ability to weave Indology, anthropological theory, myth and epic, religious texts, political and literary texts in Nepali, history (both oral and written), personal recollections (her own and others) and contemporary politics together with ethnographic voices and incidents, in order to construct a powerful interpretation and narrative, full of pithy epigrams, has left us all in her debt.

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