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SACRIFICE AND RITUALIZATION

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The ethnographic case of a rite of animal sacrifice (taxilag) in a Buddhist monastery temple in Inner Mongolia, together with other associated rites from the same region, is used to test a theory of ritualization put forward by the authors in previous publications, where the ethnographic case was the quite different and contrasting Jain puja, from Western India. This prompts some clarifications to the analytical category of sacrifice, and a clear distinction between it and ritualization. The ritualization of the ceremony in which a sacrifice is performed need not imply or require ritualization of the sacrifice itself.

In the summers of 1998 to 2002 we¹ were investigating sacred landscapes in Inner Mongolia. The southern side of the Mona Uula mountain range, running parallel to the *Huang-He* (Yellow) River, is an area believed by Mongols to be densely permeated with spirit powers. These, called “masters” (*ejid*), inhere in rivers, spring, crags, animal trails, waterfalls, caves, tops of mountains, and especially in green and bushy trees. There are also various artifacts in this landscape, such as *stupas*, victory flag-staffs, and round stone cairns called *oboo*, where the same or similar “masters” dwell or can be called into presence. It was impressed on us that the most obvious thing the local people do with regard to these sites and objects is to offer them, or the spirits in them, “sacrifices.” More exactly, they hold events called *taxilag* (from the verb *taxi-*, to propitiate), which we identified with the anthropological idea of sacrifice. Most of these occasions involve the killing of a domesticated animal, the offering of certain of its organs to the spirit power, and the subsequent consumption of the edible parts of the dead beast. Clearly ritual and clearly sacrifice, one might think. But as we observed the haphazard, *ad hoc* character of these *taxilag*, which nevertheless include certain extremely formalized sections, and when we considered the range of activities that can be called a *taxilag*—an event that sometimes deliberately omits the killing of an animal—we began to query both of the key terms. What was “ritualized” about these events? And what was “sacrificial”? The more we thought

about these questions, the more “sacrifice” and ritual” seemed to drift apart. In this paper, we explain how the Mongolian example has persuaded us that these categories should be understood as different and separate.

The argument is an extension of ideas put forward in our book, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual* (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Laidlaw and Humphrey 2006), which developed the theory that “ritual” is a quality that action can come to have, rather than being, as many other theorists had assumed, a definable category of distinctive kinds of events. Noting both that an extraordinarily wide range of actions, events, and processes can be ritualized and also that “rituals” are always ritual-somethings (that is, they always consist of actions that can be performed in unritualized ways), we suggested that the key questions a theoretical treatment of ritual needs to answer are: What happens when you perform an act *as* a ritual? What is it about ritual acts that makes them ritual? (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994:72). Our answer to these questions elaborates upon a central claim that ritualization involves the modification—an attenuation but not elimination—of the normal intentionality of human action. Ritual is action in which intentionality is in a certain way displaced so that, as we summarize the matter, participants both are and are not the authors of their ritual actions. This accounts, we argue, for many of the often-noted features of rituals: the distinctive ways in which they are rule governed; the fact that component actions have a certain object-like quality, can be repeated, have their order changed and reversed, be lengthened and shortened; and thus, the fact that to those who perform them they can seem not to be merely the outcome of what they themselves do but instead to be preexisting or archetypal entities which they somehow aim at replicating, or achieving, or entering into. There are reasons, deriving from the fact that these “archetypal actions” can have highly complex meanings attributed to them but also can be performed in abstracted or dissociated states of mind, why religion uses ritual very widely and pervasively. These same reasons also explain why religions are often ambivalent about ritual or downright hostile to it. But it is an important corollary of our argument that understanding what is distinctive about ritual is separate from understanding the nature of the acts or processes that are ritualized. This is as true of religious acts, such as sacrifice, as it is of political or social actions. Entirely non-religious actions, such as taking up citizenship of a new country, can be highly ritualized (or not), just as religious actions may be ritualized (or not) (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994:65–67).

Our book expounded its theory through a single ethnographic case, that of the Jain *puja* (a sequence of rites of worship and offering) in

11. SACRIFICE AND RITUALIZATION

257

Western India. This had its advantages in terms of the coherence of the materials and the detail we were able to draw on to explain issues concerning rules, mistakes, purposes, and meanings. But the disadvantage was that it was difficult to convey or substantiate the generality of our claims about ritualization as a modification of the intentionality of human action. It was possible for readers to see the Jain puja as a special case, that of a liturgy-based, particularly “doctrinal” ritual (Whitehouse 1995, 2004; Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004). So what better place to explore the generalizability of our ideas than in the wildly different society of rural Inner Mongolia? The taxilag, with its cheerful tramping up craggy mountains, matter-of-fact killing of livestock, fascination with blood and guts, light-hearted improvisation, and its feasting with plentiful downing of strong alcoholic spirits, seemed a world away from the precise, serious, and, one might say, almost prim activities of the Jain puja. Would our ideas about ritual apply in the Mongol case too?

A further advantage of the comparison is that it enables us to demonstrate the range and plurality of “sacrifice,” since both the Jain puja and the Mongol taxilag can be understood as varieties of this idea. This article does not aim, however, to provide a theory of sacrifice, if any such single theory were even possible. Several powerful arguments have, in very different ways, seen “sacrifice” as the kernel of religion (Girard 1977; Burkert 1983, 1987; Valeri 1985, 1994; Bloch 1986, 1992). These propositions have their own value, but our concern here is that they are weakened by conflation of the actions of the sacrifice-religion complex they are really trying to explain on the one hand and the phenomenon of ritual on the other. Bloch, of course, has made substantial contributions to the anthropological understanding of ritual (see, for example, Bloch 2004), but these are quite separate from his theory of sacrifice and “rebounding violence.” Theorists of sacrifice, because they confuse sacrifice with ritual in general, often mistakenly assume that if their theories are successful, they have explained the latter too. It sometimes even appears as if sacrifice is not just the core of religion but of ritual as well (Girard 1977:300). By disentangling these two anthropological categories, we hope to be able to show that our account of ritualization does apply to contexts very different from the Jains, and also to clarify some issues in the relation between sacrifice and religion.

ETHNOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The ethnographic context for the present study was the Buddhist Monastery of Mergen Süm and its surrounding villages and settlements

in southwestern Inner Mongolia. Before the revolutions and wars of the twentieth century, this was a large and wealthy monastic community, with seven reincarnated lamas, an elaborate hierarchy of several hundred other monks, extensive landholdings, and a fine walled complex of temples and residential buildings. The community was destroyed and disbanded, and the buildings badly damaged, in mid-century, but following the end of the Cultural Revolution, one surviving reincarnated lama, the Chorji Lama, who lives permanently in the nearby city of Bautou, has now reasserted his claims, and a small monastic community has been reestablished.

In this region sacrifice is prominent, perhaps even central to religious life. Of course, it is well known that “spirit cults” coexist with Buddhism in many Asian societies (Tambiah 1970; Spiro 1971) and that in some regions of what is called “ethnographic Tibet,” Buddhist communities still offer blood sacrifices to local deities, despite the centuries-long disapproval by lamas (Mumford 1989). Nevertheless, it was arresting to us to find blood sacrifice taking place inside a famous Gelugpa establishment—the *Gelugpa* being the reformed and most strict of the monastic traditions in North Asia. Here, the crucial organs of the carcass are laid out in the inner sanctum of a temple, right beside the Buddhist altar (see figure 11.1). Furthermore, the taxilag ceremony (or at least that part of it taking place inside the temple) is carried out by the lamas with cheerful goodwill and without a hint of condemnation. In other words, this is what seems an ideological impossibility: a Buddhist sacrifice.

Yet it is not the ideological contradiction of animal sacrifice with a religion of compassion for all living things that interests us here; and nor is this apparent ethical paradox the reason for our argument that sacrifice and ritualization should be understood as separate processes. We would make the same argument even in cases where prevalent religious values and the practice of sacrifice are in perfect harmony. And, in fact, an argument to this effect could be made for the people of Mergen district. Although disagreements about the advisability of blood sacrifice are not altogether absent, as we discuss further toward the end of this paper, we found that there is a generally accepted, long-lived, and stable tradition of “Buddhized sacrifice” in this area. It is necessary first to give a brief account of this phenomenon historically, before proceeding to our own argument.

The Mergen Monastery is the home of the line of reincarnations of the Mergen Gegen, of whom the third, Lubsandambijalsan, was particularly innovative in the early eighteenth century in composing texts to celebrate

11. SACRIFICE AND RITUALIZATION

259



FIGURE 11.1. Goat sacrifice laid out in front of the battle standard, Mergen Monastery, 1998.

local deities and “spirit masters” of the land. Crucially, this creative outpouring was included within the Buddhist cycle of rituals conducted by the lamas. A poet who rejected the Tibetan-language liturgy, which was—and still is—predominant over the whole of Inner Asia, the Third Mergen Gegen deepened and extended an earlier tradition in this monastery of using the Mongolian language for liturgy. His lyrical prayers included

paean of praise and propitiatory addresses to the local mountains, rivers, crags, and so on, mentioned earlier, as well as to a number of fierce protector deities of the Buddhist pantheon. Not only do the lamas use these same texts today, but also several of the eulogies have been adopted as folk songs by local people, which they sing at weddings and other festivals. The possibility of confluence between the Buddhist deity-image and the physical landscape around the monastery is seen in the fact that Lubsandambijalsan is said to have acquired a personal deity, *Öxin Tengger*, when he experienced a transformative vision of her as “being” on the slope of a nearby hill. He constructed a stupa (*suburgan*) to her honor on this hill. *Öxin-Tengger* is the Mongolian name of the Buddhist goddess known in Tibetan as *Baldan Lhamo*. The hill is also called *Öxin Tengger*. Though the stupa was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution, a kind of benign power is attributed to the hill itself, in the context of a landscape strategically dotted with sacred objects constructed to suppress evil spirits. In short, the Mergen Gegen validated the worship, in a “common cycle,” of deities and landscape objects that are usually, in other Buddhist regions, seen as separate and different.

Now the Gegen’s prayers acknowledge the *dokshit* (“fierce”) character of many of the deities involved. For example, one text advised for use at the sacred cairn (*oboo*) includes the words:

Collect and absorb
 The whole great power of Buddha and Bodhisattva,
 And become the emperor of fury,
 Bluish colored, fiercely angered...
 Showing your eye teeth,
 Flashing your tongue,
 Staring with your three eyes. . . .

Although the Gegen had criticized blood sacrifices at the oboo as “dirty” and “sinful” and advised making taxilag offerings without them, evidently local people in the eighteenth century had thought that only blood sacrifice could appease such local land gods. The same is still true today, with the difference that now even the Mergen lamas agree. Thus, the taxilag rite should be carried out in a “red” (blood) or a “white” (milk and grain products) variant, according to whether the deity addressed is considered to be *dokshit* or not. The essential point is that a variegated repertoire of ritual actions extends right across the spectrum, from blood sacrifice offered to the “fierce” warrior-like master spirit of the nearby mountain peak of Shar Oroi to offerings for the great “fierce” and

11. SACRIFICE AND RITUALIZATION

261

“peaceful” (*nomxon*) Buddhist deities such as Tara. The term *taxilag* is used for all of these rites, and the same idea lies behind the variety of offerings. The deity should be propitiated (*taxi-*) by whatever means it will appreciate.

Looking at the number and regularity of rites, it is fair to say that most of the time the idea of ferocious gods who protect one from harm is at least as compelling to the people in this region as the wisdom and compassion associated with the peaceful ones. Furthermore, the Buddhist “fierce” deities coexist with, and sometimes seem to elide into, images of ancestral warriors and the spirits of battle standards (as well as the spirits of the land). It is because one such battle standard (*tug*)² is kept in the Janghan Temple³ at the Mergen Monastery, its spirit requiring blood propitiation, that we discovered the seeming anomaly of the goat carcass beside the altar.

The ethnographic materials used for this article include our own detailed participant observation of the *taxilags* for Shar Oroï Peak (1998) and the battle standard (2000 and 2002), as well as of a non-sacrificial ritual held annually at the Mergen Monastery, the Mani ceremony of 2000. Besides these, we have had access to videotapes and descriptions of a variety of “red” and “white” *taxilags* to a sacred tree, a spring, and a cairn (*oboo*), and another example of the Shar Oroï mountain ritual, all from 1999.⁴

INTRODUCING THE ARGUMENT

With this ethnographic introduction, it is now possible for us to outline our argument in brief. The *taxilag* for the battle standard is perhaps the most elaborate “ritual” we observed, but we argue in the following section that the ritualization seen here is not, for the most part, ritualization of the sacrifice. The sacrifice itself remains comparatively unritualized, and the crucial killing of the animal, on the occasion we observed it, was entirely practical (that is, it did not even incorporate those ritual elements the Mongols told us “should” take place on such occasions). Instead, as we suggest in the subsequent section, the complex and elaborate ritualization of the *tug* (battle standard) ceremony derives from its incorporation in the cycle of Buddhicized worship. That is, it derives from the assimilation of the spirit of the battle standard to the pantheon of fierce (*dokshit*) deities and hence of the *tug* rites into the “Buddhist” repertoire of the lamas. In other words, the offering to the *tug* includes a whole range of rites also used in many other standard Buddhist ceremonies. This point is demonstrated by a comparison of the *tug* rites with the non-sacrificial Mani ceremony. Although the latter is explained locally by entirely different purposes from those

attributed to the tug sacrifice—one version is the attaining of spiritual completeness—an identical array of ritualized actions are employed in it (along with some others that are different). In both the tug and the Mani ceremonies, we see the characteristic features of ritualization: the preset “non-intentional” character of ritual acts, the presence of stipulating constitutive rules, the dividing up of action into discrete acts that may be moved or displaced, and the attribution of different meanings to the same ritualized act (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Laidlaw and Humphrey 2006). Thus, in both the tug and the Mani, we found the repetition of the same discrete, highly ritualized actions, such as manipulations of an arrow, mirror, grains, and sacred water, and rites of “penitence” (*namanchilag*) and receiving empowered, blessed objects (*adis*). These “movable” ritual acts (meaning those that can be injected into many different ceremonies) are interspersed with others that are particular to a given rite and with some actions that are not ritualized at all. And in all the rites we observed, it is the movable acts that predominate, taking up the great majority of time. Yet, for many of these movable ritual acts, it is difficult even for the Mongol participants to conceptualize their relevance to any of the events at issue: in the cases of the tug sacrifice and the Mani, respectively, the worship of a fierce deity and the attainment of spiritual completeness. In fact, ritualization here goes further than in the Jain case, to the point of virtually obliterating any coherent conception of the overall structure of the event. As a result, the rationale for including, or not including, any given ritual act in the sequence becomes weak. Uncertainty among the lamas, even on the days of the rite, about what would be in it and therefore how long it would last, is an indication of the highly ritualized, formulaic character of these “archetypal actions” in their repertoire.

These ideas may be discussed in relation to theories of sacrifice. Bloch’s (1992) account of “rebounding violence,” for instance, is one of the most persuasive recent anthropological works on the nature of sacrifice. However, it applies much more clearly to less ritualized than to more ritualized instances. This is true whether it is the sacrificial killing itself, or, as in the Mongol battle-standard case, the encompassing event (the offering as a whole) that is ritualized. Thus, to some extent, ritualization is a process that works against the symbolic/ideological dynamic that authors such as Bloch and Valeri identify in sacrifice. The more ritualized a series of actions, the more they need to be decoded by the anthropologist in order to show that such a theory applies, because the rite as performed decreasingly resembles the underlying event or process that has been ritualized—the sacrifice. The meaning and coherence of

the underlying event is obscured, dissipated, and dispersed by ritualization. Therefore, we conclude, the more a sacrifice is ritualized, the less clearly it is sacrificial in a religious sense.⁵

URAD MONGOL SACRIFICE

The claim that the key event of sacrifice, the killing of the living being, can be relatively little ritualized may seem surprising, because we tend to assume that people generally ritualize what is important to them. In this section, we show first that sacrifice as such is highly important to the Mongols of the Mergen area, and secondly, that it does not constitute the most highly ritualized part of the *taxilag* (even though the latter can be described as a whole as a “ritual sacrifice”). For descriptive purposes, we define “sacrifice” here as comprised of three related sequences:⁶ the killing of a live being, the offering of its life (or some concept such as its “life energy”) to a spirit or deity, and the subsequent acquiring of benefit or fortune of some kind through the consumption of parts of the offering (Bloch 1992).⁷

One could argue that sacrifice is central to the identity of the people of Mergen considered historically. These are Urad Mongols, a group claiming descent from Chingghis Khan’s brother Habt Hasar, who were sent from their homeland in the far north near the Russian border by the Manchu Qing Dynasty in the seventeenth century to conquer and guard their present lands. Until the early twentieth century, the Urad Mongols comprised three *Banners*⁸ in the Qing imperial structure, and most of their territories are still known as “Banners” (*Hosbuu*) today.⁹ When one considers that these are incomers, for whom “conquering” and “guarding” territory was central to their *raison d’être* in the area, it makes a certain sense that the lay Mongols have chosen “fierce” gods as their primary objects of worship and that they devote so much energy to the propitiation of the spirits of the land. The profound meaning of sacrifice for the success of their endeavor—that is, the reproduction of the good fortune (*xishig*) of a victorious people in a land beset by spirit and human enemies—is indicated by certain Mongols’ claim that the original sacrifices were of human beings. They speak of human sacrifice with horrified fascination and say it was productive of a terrible power.

We were told that the very first sacrifices for the battle standard, the spirit of the Huang-Ho River, and the Banner *oboo* (the stone cairn where regular gatherings of the Urad groups were held) consisted of the killing of human enemies. Such sacrifices are said to have been necessary to provide spiritual strength in times of extreme danger. The 1940s, with fighting between Communists, Republicans, and so-called warlords, were

another such time. We met an elderly man who said his uncle had been deputed to find a human victim for the Banner oboo sacrifice but had been unable to do so, and therefore the Banner had to resort to the usual substitution, an ox, which was the custom in more peaceable times. According to accounts of the human sacrifice, the victim should be male, an enemy,¹⁰ and ideally covered with unusually copious body hair (the word for animal fur was used for this). This victim was made drunk, then tightly and completely bound from the feet upward, forcing the blood into the head. He was dispatched by the Banner leader who would spear the skull, producing a spectacular spurt of blood. This blood, spattered on the standard or the cairn, was said to give invincible power to the ancestral and other spirits who would assure the victorious existence of the Urad Mongols. These events were described to us with some embarrassment, since everyone has been educated to think of them as the height of “superstition.” Some people claimed they were “just stories.” Yet few people locally doubt that human sacrifice has indeed taken place on rare occasions. They say that their present sacrifices of livestock to the standard and the oboo are direct continuations of the same rite. The substitution of animal for human victims happens because in more peaceful times less extreme sacrifices are necessary.

Two things seem to us to follow from this account: first, that killing and the offering of blood are central to the Mongols’ concept of sacrifice; and second, that sacrifice as an event is integral to their beliefs about the successful reproduction of their existence in times of danger. It is impossible to speculate with any degree of reliability about the degree to which the human sacrifices in the past were ritualized. But in the present rites—which, let us remember, people say are a direct continuation of these human sacrifices—the actual killing is hardly ritualized at all. In effect, the event of “sacrifice” is hidden amid a thicket of other ritualized acts.

THE SACRIFICE TO THE BATTLE STANDARD

The central example for this paper is the *taxilag* for the *tug* (battle standard), which is kept in the most sacred inner sanctum of the Janghan Temple. This *tug* is said to have belonged to a seventeenth-century ancestor called Jargal Baatar, and it is preserved along with his armor and clothing. The ceremony lasts for most of a day and consists of four ritual sections, called *chig* by the lamas. Each *chig* is separated by a break in the ritual, when the lamas leave the temple and retire to their quarters to rest. As described to us the day before the *taxilag*, each *chig* is supposed to comprise a number of specific named rites. Yet evidently, as will be detailed below, some of these rites

11. SACRIFICE AND RITUALIZATION

265

can be left out, while others may be repeated, thus lengthening or shortening the section and the ritual as a whole. These decisions are taken as the day proceeds and, as far as we could gather, according to the mood of the directing lama.¹¹

We were told that a yellowish sheep would be the best offering to the tug, and that the killing of the animal was due to take place during the first chig. What actually happened was that the man deputed to obtain a yellowish sheep could not find one and bought a white goat. The goat was unceremoniously dispatched, in a residential compound in the monastery, during the gap between the first and second chigs, by a layman. Meanwhile, the first chig proceeded as a series of rites initiated by the blowing of a conch shell and clashing of cymbals outside the doors of the Janghan Temple. The lamas and the entire congregation then proceeded into the temple for the taxilag rites. Although the four chigs can be lengthened or shortened at will, it seems that the actual sacrifice, the killing of the animal, is not one of these rites. Both by virtue of its timing (between chigs) and its spatial location (outside the temple, though inside the monastery), the physical killing is in a sense excluded from the taxilag. The sacrificial meat is included only as one element in a list of various offerings made later in the rite to the deity of the standard, all the rest of which are what we have called “movable” elements found also in other Buddhist rituals.

The tug taxilag in the temple started with the *megezem* (a prayer to Padmasambhava), the *itgel* (vow of belief), and the *chain taxil* (offering of tea to the lamas). The head lama then enumerated the offerings in ritual units called *ja*, a foreign term used by lamas for “share.” The offerings on this occasion were listed as “a sheep one unit” (despite the fact that everyone knew a goat was in the offering), “salt three units,” “tea two units,” “milk six units,” and other items such as money and buns. The use of special, non-everyday terms for these items, the counting in the unfamiliar units of *ja*, and the evident divorce between the list and the actual offerings it ostensibly described, indicate that the act of listing was itself ritualized. This listing of items was immediately followed by the *daatgal*, a short standard text by which people hand over their lives (or some activity of central importance to them) to the total protection of a god. The *daatgal* was repeated many times. The lamas then swung into a series of chants, each for a named dokshit deity, which they read from the Mergen Gegen’s Mongolian texts. These greatly exceeded the earlier rites in length and fervor. With musical encouragements, the low roar of long trumpets, the thud of the large drum, clashing cymbals, ringing of bells, and rattling of hand-drums, each dokshit

deity was described and invoked at length. One deity in this series was the well-known fierce protector god *Yamandaga*.¹² Another was *Gagch Baatar* (Lone Warrior Hero), also a deity well known in the Buddhist pantheon. After about an hour of these invocations, the music rose to a loud crescendo and then chanting ceased. At this point, as we were later told, the gods descended (*burxan buudaj baina*). After a final, more subdued prayer to the calm (*nomxon*) deity, White Tara, the first chig ended.

In the interval following the first chig, as we sat around having tea in the compound of the Chorji Lama, some distance from the temple, the goat was brought in and dispatched beside us. A specialist butcher (a layman) was employed, and he killed the animal by slitting its chest, reaching in his arm, feeling for the aorta, and tearing it apart. He made no protective, purificatory or other ritual preparations; nor were there any preparatory rites of purification of the goat, such as we were later told “should” take place for sacrifices. In fact, the goat sacrifice was done in exactly the same way that Mongols normally kill animals (for regular food). They always try to employ a specialist slaughterer, and they always use the tearing of the aorta method. Now this method may look ritualized to one unfamiliar with Mongolia, simply because it seems a strange way of killing an animal. In fact, though, it has a practical purpose, which is the conservation of the blood within the carcass for later use as food. The “management of blood” appears to have been a key concern in the human sacrifice too, even though the method of dispatch in the latter case seems far more bizarre. This became apparent to us when we heard the details of a threat of “human sacrifice” from a distant region in northern Mongolia (Morten Pedersen, personal communication). During the 1930s, a Communist activist had strayed into this remote area of fierce resistance. He was captured and threatened with death. The locals described how they would kill him: by binding him tightly from the feet upward to his lower chest, and then from the top of his head downward to his upper chest. The blood would be concentrated in the area of his heart. When his chest was slit, his heart would spring out from between his ribs with a jet of blood. This horrifying act was to be dedicated to the battle standard of the rebels. We see that what is aimed at here is a practical and shocking effect, even a symbolic effect, and that this can be achieved in different ways. What is important here are the act itself and the intention behind it, not the performance of a standardized convention, as is characteristic of ritualization.

In the tug sacrifice, if the actual killing of the goat is more or less unritualized, the offering of its parts to the deity is distinctly more so.

11. SACRIFICE AND RITUALIZATION

267

Parts and named actions are specified in advance and are the same as those used in other blood sacrifices, such as those to the mountain deity. It is specified that “red” offerings must include the *jülde*, the *chus*, and the *chüs*. The *jülde* is said to consist of “the five organs” (*taban tsol*), those parts held to sustain life (the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, and head), to which, for some reason no one could explain, the right foreleg and the four right top ribs should be added. The ankles and hooves with the entire skin must be included in the offering as a sign that the whole animal is being offered. The *chus* (blood) is represented by a small jar of raw blood, and the *chüs* (bile) is likewise placed uncooked in a jar for offering. The main lama gave laconic instructions to the butcher on how to excise these parts correctly. When laid out in the temple, the *jülde* is wrapped in the goatskin, the hairy side inward, with the head facing toward the battle standard. Slits are made in the skin so that the eyes can “see” the tug. The goat’s eyes are therefore kept open, as is its mouth, the latter being a sign that the goat can vomit out its “five organs” to the god. Immediately after the killing, this entire offering is brought into the temple and laid out before the battle standard, just to the right of the Buddhist altar, together with butter lamps.

We wondered throughout this ritual exactly to whom or to what the sacrifice was being given. People had spoken to us of the battle standard itself (*tug*), which is a pole some 7 feet in height topped with a metal trident. Just below the trident is a metal circle, from which dangles long, tangled, black hair (said to be human hair). They also said the addressee of the sacrifice might be the spirit (*sülde*) of the tug, or a Buddhist deity, *Gungga*, locally called *Tavan Khan*, said by some to be the “master” of the tug.¹³ The lama who carried in and laid out the *jülde* made three soundless prostrations to the Buddhist altar, which bears representations of many deities, among them Tavan Khan. After numerous fruitless inquiries, we were forced to admit that the designee of the sacrifice was unclear.¹⁴ Certainly Tavan Khan never rose to particular prominence in the liturgy as the tug *taxilag* rites continued.

The second *chig* now began with a rite that had no apparent relevance to the sacrifice at all. This was the “confession to the four fierce gods” (*dör-bön dokshit-yn namanchilag*).¹⁵ The *namanchilag* are long texts, chanted according to the words and melodies of the Mergen Gegen, which describe and call upon each god to forgive known and unknown sins. We noted that the lamas were chanting for their own sins to be forgiven, whereas it was the laity who had made the goat offering, which seemed to be entirely ignored during this section. Lay worshipers continued to

arrive, stood around briefly in silence, and perhaps offered some money to a lama or placed it on an altar, before being seated behind the chanting lamas. Some, but not all, stayed through the remainder of the ceremony. After around an hour of the confession chants, the lamas moved to a rite called *xariguulag*, whereby a deity is implored to “fight back” and vanquish devils. A *xariguulag* was chanted for each of the well-known “fierce” Buddhist gods. The second *chig* concluded with the throwing out of *balings* (cone and phallic-shaped dough models, said to be offerings). We were told that many godlings and spirits gather when a *taxilag* is held. The *balings* are thrown out at several points during the ritual. They are scattered in all “15 directions,” as well as onto the roof of the temple, to appease hovering spirits, with the idea: “Be happy and keep away, leave us to perform this ritual in peace.” Other people, however, interpreted the *balings* as “weapons” thrown like spears to attack evil spirits.

We hope that enough has been said, without an exhaustive description of the entire *taxilag*, to indicate the relatively peripheral role in it of two of the three key elements of sacrifice—namely, the killing of a live being and the offering of its parts to the deity. The third core element of the sacrifice, consumption of parts of the offering by the congregation, occurs, however, in parts that are rather highly ritualized. This can be seen from the fact that the essential operation—ingestion of the offering returned back from the deity and transformed as blessing or fortune (Bloch 1992)—is divided by the Mongols into several different rites and actions. However, the result of this ritualization is that these various actions are so separate from the acts of killing and offering, and from one another, that the logic of “the sacrifice” is obscured.

The main act of consumption, the feast (*xool*), is hardly ritualized at all. The ritual appropriate to this occasion is the same as that obtaining at feasts in general. We ate the cooked meat of the goat at a cheerful and entirely secular feast out of doors in the Chorji Lama’s compound during the interval between the second and third *chig*, a meal to which all and sundry were invited.

Similarly unritualized is the “consumption” of the *jülde*, the symbolic parts of the animal laid before the deity. We were told that the *jülde* should be taken away by the *gonir* lama¹⁶ and, in private after the ritual, eaten in its entirety, including the eyes, the idea being that nothing offered to the god should be thrown away.¹⁷ But this provision—that it should all be eaten—is the only prescription he appears to be under.¹⁸

Another, highly ritualized act of consumption does take place, however, in the main body of the temple during the third *chig*. This happens in

11. SACRIFICE AND RITUALIZATION

269

the context of the ritual act of “beckoning of fortune” (*dalalga*). While the Chorji Lama waves an “arrow of heaven” and holds a bowl of grains,¹⁹ the lay patron or offerer of the sacrifice holds up a platter with the *dalalga* foods and, with a circular gesture, calls in the blessing (*xesbig*) of the god(s). The contents of the platter go to this patron and should be taken home for consumption within the immediate family and on no account given to outsiders. Now “logically” the platter should contain parts of the goat offering which should, therefore, be kept back from the collective feast. Lamas said that the cooked right foreleg should be part of the *dalalga* meat—and at a *taxilag* we attended for the deity of the Shar Oroï mountain peak, this indeed was the case. At the tug ritual in 2000, however, the *dalalga* platter contained bread, dates, cheese, and dried cream, and thus bore no evident relation to the goat sacrifice. The “movable” character of the *dalalga* rite in general is indicated by the fact that it can take place on its own, as well as in conjunction with many other ceremonial sequences aside from the *taxilag*: for example, at funerals, at the giving away of a bride, or at the calling-in of migratory birds in the spring (Chabros 1992).

So far we have shown that the “consumption” phase of sacrifice is divided into three (or two if we exclude the *jülde*, as Valeri would argue). The communal meal, so central to many theories of sacrifice—from Robertson Smith to Detienne and Vernant (1989) and Valeri (1994)—is separated from the consuming of the parts actually offered to the god and, more singularly, from the rite of ingestion of good fortune by the offering participants. The *taxilag* contains a further type of consumption. This is *adis*, the ceremonial handing out of fortune-conveying foods to the congregation by the lamas. One explanation of *adis* is that it is the blessed leftovers of the deity. The nearest equivalent to this we know from other cultures is the *prasad* or *prabhavana* distributed in Indian temples. Like the *dalalga*, the giving out of *adis* is a “movable” ritual act that occurs in many diverse situations. The *adis* at the goat sacrifice was distributed twice, first to lamas alone during the third *chig*, and afterward to the laity outside the temple. It consisted of biscuits and a brownish, sweet tea-like liquid, poured by a lama from a brass pot onto a peacock feather. The liquid was then dripped onto the palms of the lamas or lay participants, who then licked it up.

To convey to our readers how these various rites of consumption were distributed among other, unrelated rites at the tug *taxilag*, let us simply list the sequence of rites in the third *chig*, many of which, the reader will notice, have also occurred during the first two *chigs*: (1) smoke offering (*ünesen sang*); (2) chant for ghosts (*totxor*); (3) offering of balings; (4) a chant called *sülde* (spirit or soul-inspiration); (5) libation of alcohol (*altan*

taxil); (6) prayer to Mon Khan, the deity of the Shar Oroi Mountain; (7) the “beckoning” of dalalga; (8) repetition of smoke offering; (9) washing the face of god (*nuur ugaalah*); (10) chant for raising the spirit (*sülde devdeb*); (11) giving of adis; (12) repetition of “washing the face”;²⁰ (13) prayer to Yamandaga; (14) chant to the White Tara goddess; (15) adis biscuits given out to all lamas, but not to lay people; and finally, (16), a rite called *gurim* or “the triple repulse” (*gurvan xariuulag*), which was tacked on at the request of one of the laity to get rid of a personal misfortune. This was rapidly chanted from memory—the lamas were already folding up the trumpets and wrapping up their texts.

This having been done, the lamas silently told their prayer beads and put their hands together. They clapped three times, and with this the *taxilag* ended. It turned out to our surprise that the fourth *chig* had effectively been compressed into the third. We were told later about how one rite, the “wind horse” (*xii mori*), which should have been part of the fourth sequence, had been amalgamated with the *sülde* chant in the middle of the third *chig*. The reason for the shortening of the whole ritual may have been simply that the lamas were tired after many hours of chanting.

To summarize, let us briefly assess this description of the *taxilag* to the battle standard in respect, first, of the structure of sacrifice and, second, in relation to our theory of ritualization.

It was stated earlier that sacrifice consists of at least three elements: the killing of a consecrated live being, the offering of its life energy to the deity, and the ingestion by the congregation of the transformed substance of the offering as a blessing. In the case at hand, the acquisition and dispatch of the victim was, in effect, not ritualized and was carried out outside the ritual space of the *taxilag*. The symbolic offering of the life force of the animal (*jülde*), on the other hand, was brought centrally into the ritual space. But the spiritual designate of the sacrifice was never clear, and hence it was not evident which of the ritual chants was the one whereby the *jülde* was offered up. As for the third element, certain rites of incorporation of fortune by the participants were included in the *taxilag*. But this function of blessing-giving consumption was dispersed into four separate elements (the communal feast, the “beckoning fortune” rite, the giving of adis, and the eating of the *jülde*), two of which took place outside the ritual space and time of the *taxilag* (the feast and the eating of the *jülde*).

Meanwhile, the elements of sacrifice that were incorporated in the *taxilag* ceremony as a whole were mixed up with numerous other rites that greatly exceeded them in number, complexity, auditory and visual salience, and length of time involved. This was particularly obvious in the

11. SACRIFICE AND RITUALIZATION

271

final sequence, as the acquisition of spiritual fortune or blessing was—according to our informants—gained as much through the “wind horse” and “raising the spirit” ritual chants as from the more clearly sacrificial elements (the feast, the *dalalga*, and the consumption of *adis*). In such ways, the line of “logic” of the sacrifice was dispersed and obscured.

CONCLUSION

Our theory of ritual mentioned earlier applies without difficulty to the case of Mongolian sacrifice. We see in this case the crucial role of ritual space, for example, where the terrain is divided into the highly sacred temple sanctum, the less sacred space inside the temple, and the relatively non-sacred area of the Chorji’s compound. The siting of actions in one or another of these spaces is significant. That the killing of the animal, for example, took place in the least sacred area is certainly not an accident and surely is related to the Buddhist disapproval of killing (however subdued such disapproval is in this monastery). Our idea that highly ritualized acts are “nonintentional” in the sense of being stipulated in advance, necessary for the achievement of the ritual, and open to a variety of meanings and purposes, was also confirmed by the tug ceremony. This ritual sequence of sacrifice contained rites that are commonly performed as parts of quite other ceremonies, and there is no clear reason for their incorporation here other than the idea that, by established tradition, they have to be done.

As for sacrifice, while the tripartite structure of actions mentioned above is manifested in the battle-standard ceremony, these actions are only patchily ritualized. The relation between such blood sacrifices and “religion” can certainly be questioned in the Mongol case, given their similarity to the dispatch of victims in actual fields of battle, on the one hand, and their uneasy juxtaposition with Buddhism, on the other. Considering Mack’s claim (1987:8) that ritual is by definition a reenactment of a “prior event,” it might be possible to argue that sacrifice in the Mongolian case should not be considered ritual in this sense. The human sacrifices were not thought by participants to be reenactments but contingent actions undertaken to deal with particular, dire circumstances. Possibly, for the Mongols, sacrifice in general always has something of this character, even when it is conducted regularly. Even if we concede that such blood sacrifices are in some sense religious, it would be quite another matter to “identify” them with ritual. We have argued that ritualization is a separate process, one that is injected into sacrificial action at certain points and not others. The interesting question then becomes, why are certain acts so much more ritualized than others?

GLOSSARY

- adis*: Empowering blessing, usually bestowed by a lama, and objects so empowered.
- baling*: Small cone- and phallus-shaped dough shapes, often red in color, offered in temple rituals.
- chig*: Section of a lengthy ritual.
- dalalga*: Plate of meat, blessed during a sacrificial ritual, through which blessing is conveyed to the patron and his or her family.
- dokshit*: “Fierce” deities, requiring blood offerings. Contrast *nomxon*.
- ejid*: Literally “masters.” Spirits residing in rivers, animal trails, mountaintops, and other features of the landscape.
- jülde*: Parts of the corpse of a sacrificed animal, laid out as an offering, and consisting of the five life-sustaining organs (heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, and head), wrapped in the animal’s skin.
- Mani*: Annual Buddhist ceremonial rite, during which small edible pellets, later taken away and consumed by worshipers, are endowed with spiritual power (*adis*) by means of recitation of sacred texts by lamas.
- namanchilag*: Rite of propitiation and penitence, characteristically to appease fierce (*dokshit*) deities.
- nomxon*: “Peaceful” deities, requiring vegetarian offerings. Contrast *dokshit*.
- oboo*: Semi-spherical monument, usually of undressed stones, wherein reside *ejid* (spirits).
- puja*: Rite of worship, often before a temple image, in Hinduism and Jainism.
- taxilag*: Sacrifice; sacrificial ritual.
- tug*: Battle standard.

NOTES

1. The team included, at various times, Caroline Humphrey, James Laidlaw, Balzhan Zhimbiev, Christopher Evans, and A. Hürelbaatar from Cambridge, and Nasanbayar, Gai Zhe-yi, and Mönhbuyan from Huhhot, Inner Mongolia.
2. The battle standard (*tug*) is different from the victory flag-mast (*darchug*), a post with colored cloth streamers. The latter are erected in the landscape to suppress evil forces. Most of them were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution, but one or two have started to appear again, for example opposite the main door of the (sadly now late) Lama Lubsansengge’s house in a village not far from Mergen. The *tug*, by contrast, celebrates human victories over human enemies. The most noted examples in Inner Mongolia are kept at the Chinggis Khan mausoleum in the Ordos.
3. The Janghan Temple is the smaller of the two currently working temples at the Mergen Monastery. The other temple notably contains a huge statue of the Maitreya Buddha and is not used for sacrifices. The allocation of one separate

11. SACRIFICE AND RITUALIZATION

273

temple for sacrifices, often called the Deity Temple, is common in Mongolian and Buryat Buddhist monasteries.

4. The 1999 field observations were made by our colleague Hürelbaatar, who also accompanied us to Mergen in 1998, 2000, and 2002.
5. This argument may be compared with Girard's theory (1977) that violence is the manifestation of the sacred in a dual mode: (a) the terror of uncontrolled killing, and (b) the control of violence effected by rituals of sacrifice. Ritual—that is, “control”—is thus necessary to transform killing into sacrifice. Thus far, we would agree with Girard, insofar as this argument preserves a distinction between the action (killing) and ritualization. What is more problematical is his assumption that sacrifice is central to ritual in general (1977:300).
6. Valeri (1994) offers a slightly different list of four components. However his first—induction or preparation of the victim—is, as we shall see below, absent in this case. His others are taking of the life, renunciation (which may include giving to a deity) of part of the victim, and consumption of (the rest of) it. These correspond to Bloch's three elements.
7. Clearly, many different actions have been counted as “sacrifice” in European historical contexts, and they are so varied that it is difficult to specify a root meaning of the term. This can be seen if one considers the divergent meanings attributed to the Christian Eucharist when it is defined as a (symbolic) sacrifice. It should be noted that neither “sacrifice” nor “ritual” is a concept with an exact Mongolian equivalent. We use Bloch's definition here for heuristic purposes.
8. A Banner was an administrative division responsible for providing troops and other dues to the state.
9. The Mergen Monastery was formerly in the Urad West Banner. In a recent administrative reorganization designed to extend the territories subject to cities in Inner Mongolia, the Mergen lands were incorporated in the urban district of Baotou city.
10. Normally, we were told, this victim was a Chinese. It was said by Mongols that an elderly man would volunteer to be a sacrificial victim, since this was an honorable way to die and would assure the good fortune of descendants.
11. Although the reincarnated Chorji Lama was the highest-ranking lama present, and therefore presided in a formal sense, the practical direction of the ceremony was in the hands of another, very senior, knowledgeable and liturgically experienced, but not reincarnated, lama.
12. In Tibetan Buddhism, Yamandaga is generally held to be of higher status than the other dokshit deities. A *yamad* (= Skt. *ishta*) is a chosen or personal deity. See Samuel 1993:166.
13. *Tavan Khan* (Five Kings) consists of five fierce (dokshit) gods, said to belong to the “red root” of Tantric Buddhism (Sodubilig 1996:208). The group of deities Tavan Khan belongs to is considered to be lower than the Four Dokshit. The significant fact about Tavan Khan is that this deity is both a Buddhist god and a spirit-master of the land (Naranbatu, personal communication). Thus, some oboos in the Mergen area are said to have Tavan Khan as their spirit.
14. This is true also in many other traditions. See Heesterman 1993:13 on ancient India; Yerkes 1953:74–79 on ancient Greece; and Valeri 1985:61; 1994:107, for general discussion.
15. The number four here appears to be liturgically specified, but arbitrary in relation to the number of dokshit recognized by the Mergen lamas and worshiped during the taxilag.

16. The office of *gonir lama* in a Mongolian Buddhist monastery has attached to it the duties of a temple custodian, including, especially, looking after offerings.
17. Only the bones of the sacrifice are not eaten. They are not thrown away but should be carefully burned.
18. At first sight, this stipulation might appear to contradict Valeri's (1994:107–108) insistence on distinguishing the part of the victim that is “renounced” from that which is “consumed,” but the *gonir lama*, in this role, is not a patron or normal participant in the rite, and the rule that he should consume the food, and do so out of sight, appears to be basically a method of “secure disposal” of the offering which, now belonging to the gods, should be neither consumed “normally” as food nor left to decompose. The same concern, interestingly, is found among the Jains. Offerings made in a temple may never be taken away or consumed by observant Jains, but are eaten by paid Hindu temple servants (*pujaris*). It does, therefore, make sense, in Valeri's terms, that this part of the animal and the remainder that is eaten collectively in the feast are kept separate and “consumed” differently.
19. The *dalalga* arrow is not a practical artifact but a symbolic object with five notches and five colored streamers, known widely in Buddhist rituals from Tibet to Manchuria. In Tibet, the arrow and the vessel of grain represent the male and female elements, respectively (Nebesky-Woykowitz 1975:365).
20. The “washing the face” rite was done continuously during the last phase of the third *chig* in the inner hall of the temple, while the other chants were being carried out in the outer hall. “Washing the face” was said by one informant to be a rite of respectful farewell to the deities, with the idea, “We have called you to our temple. You have come through the dusty world. Now we cleanse you before sending you back.”

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275

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276 CAROLINE HUMPHREY AND JAMES LAIDLAW

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