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Blood Signals

On the Symbolism and Ritual Pertinence of Blood

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En första version av följande text presenterades vid ett tvärvetenskapligt symposium ("Blood Rituals: Past and Present") som jag och Per Faxneld organiserade i samarbete med den fransk-kanadensiske semiotikern Paul Bouissac vid Stockholms universitet i maj 2015. När jag inbjöds att medverka i ett specialnummer av DIN till Håkan Rydvings ära, tänkte jag att den ännu opublicerade texten kunde passa bra. Redan under min första tid som doktorand i Uppsala tog jag starkt intryck av Håkans förmåga att förena källkritiskt detaljarbete med teoretiskt utmanande resonemang kring abstrakta storheter som myt och rit – en ofta underskattad simultankapacitet bland religionshistoriker. Följande text är ett försök att i en liknande anda ompröva den symboliska representationen (och rituella användningen) av blod mot bakgrund av några vitt åtskilda religionshistoriska och religionsarkeologiska exempel.

Nyckelord: blodsymbolik, paleolitiska gravskick, menstruation, förbundet vid Sinai

The cultural matrix of blood is profoundly associated with the sphere of religion. When we aim for religious institutions boasting exceptional historical and ethnographic depth, blood, both in its physical and proxy appearance, seems to be a vital component. I write "seems to be" because I am still somewhat hesitant. Two forms of established practice, burial and animal sacrifice, are especially suitable for interrogation. Not because of what they seem to be in themselves, but because of the questions they typically evoke regarding the ritual symbolism of blood, namely (1) what is said to represent blood in burial, and (2) what blood

is said to represent in sacrifice. I will soon come back to these questions, but first let me touch upon a more fundamental issue.

Consider the superficial, first-order assumption about the symbolic potentiality of blood in ritual practice: blood is expected to be a vital symbolic component in ritual, because it is a vital biological fluid.[29] The assumption seems irrefutable at first glance, yet on closer consideration it brings back bad memories of Frazer's intellectualist approach to ritual. Whatever it may have meant for ritual blood (whether by proxy or not) to contain a red liquid indispensable to the continuation of life, such a logic of contiguity does not exhaust the ritual pertinence. If blood rituals were merely misinformed experiments in bio-engineering, why insist on repeating them? Medical blood surrogates, such as artificial haemoglobin, can be effectively used today as a means of mimicking the function of biological blood, but this need not suggest that the mimicking at work in ritual contexts somehow prefigures the medical efficacy along the lines of quasi-medical reasoning.

Nevertheless, it remains an archaeological habitus to interpret the mortuary use of red ochre as a symbolic restoration of life, because blood is thought to *mean* life (Wreschnser 1980:633). The association of ochre with burials is a widely attested occurrence, dating back at least to the Middle Palaeolithic (Ibid. 632). One of the earliest and most conspicuous example comes from the archaeological site of the Qafzeh Cave in Israel. In a stratigraphic layer with an average date of 92.000 years ago, large amounts of ochre lumps were found in association with hominid remains (Hovers 2003:491). Despite arguments to the contrary, I react with strong hesitation to the tendency in treating such markers of mortuary practice – no matter how early – as the legible tokens of a ritual lingua franca. By thus curiously restoring meaning to a sparse and tacit archaeological record, the notion of a universal ritual idiom inevitably violates an otherwise commonplace notion of cultural varie-

[29] Examples of such foundational derivations of blood symbolism abound in classical anthropological literature. Consider, for instances, the following statement by Edmund Leach (Leach 1976:60): "it is very common to find that *red* is treated as a sign of *danger*, which may be derived from red = blood. But *red* is also quite often associated with *joy*, which might come from red = blood = life."

gation. Ritual symbols are thus no longer held to become endlessly suggestive through the indeterminately shifting conventions of human agency, but are rather taken to be grounded in some natural state of affairs.

A similar fallacy of interpretation characteristically defines the age-old belief in an original iconicity of language. By way of example, Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) derivation of the German noun *Blitz* from a primeval poetic idiom of immediate sensation, according to which *Blitz* naturally meant *das Urplötzlichschnelle*. With all due deference to the cross-cultural pertinence of sound symbolism, the fact that phonemes are units of linguistic communication does not imply that they were once self-contained semantic units. The same phonemic sequence may, for instance, recur in different languages for purely phonotactic reasons.

Archaeologist Erella Hovers and her co-authors cautiously avoid the naturalizing spell in their analysis of the ochre record from Qafzeh Cave. Instead of trying to derive a universally grounded local meaning from the burials, they prefer to interrogate their data as a means to generalize heuristic criteria of symbolic behaviour (Hovers et al. 2003:510). What they end up with is thus not the speculative decoding of particular customs, but rather a generic description of encoded human practice: "a […] redundant system of decision making guided by nonpractical criteria and directed toward nonpractical goals." (Ibid. 507)

If one considers symbolic behaviour in its already evolved capacity to artificially elicit emotions, sensations, and interpretations, it follows that the symbolic potentiality of blood and ochre cannot ensue from an inherent sense of red. The cross-cultural salience of red (alongside black and white) in systems of colour categorisation is another indication that it rather functions as an open-ended medium of visual information. Had it been inherently parochial, already constrained by some predetermined semantic permutations (e.g. blood → danger → death → life), red pigment (including blood) would be a less efficacious vehicle for representation. Red would, then, always stand in the way by means of that for which it already stands. I will come back to these issues below.

Despite such reservations, the urge persists among evolutionary anthropologists to decipher a fixed script behind all symbolic behaviour involving blood and its substitutes. In the particular case I have in mind, this urge even amounts to imagining a primitive blood ritual to have constituted the original plot of human symbolic behaviour. The Darwinian tale (the 'sham-menstruation' hypothesis), as originally devised by the British anthropologist Chris Knight, revolves around the foundational event of a collective fraud (Knight 1991). Red ochre, Knight argues, was first used by the female members of archaic hunting communities to emit artificially amplified blood signals. Non-menstruating females would thus fake menstruation in order to secure synchronized mating and the sharing of cooked meat. Male hunters returned to camp with their prey in anticipation of a switched off phase of sex and feasting, whereas sex with a menstruating female and the hunter's off-camp consumption of blood (= raw meat) evolved into analogous tokens of ritual inviolability. Since successful hunting expeditions would have required nocturnal light, the artificial correlation between

> sexual access and hunting success was also tied to the external device of lunar periodicity. The ritual cycle began at dark moon and reached its climax in adjacency to the return of the hunting team at full moon (Watts 2006:96).

My initial astonishment at this imaginative yet excessively speculative hypothesis did not grow less when I realized its great impact on the scholarly debate. When Knight and two of his peers (Camilla Power and Ian Watts) are given an opportunity to comment on the Qafzeh data, they insist on having developed a model proven viable on account of its testable predictions, and that it (i.e. the sham-menstruation hypothesis) "can account for such recurrent features as red-ochre burials" on the level of certain time-resistant syntactic features (Hovers et al. 2003:514). While superficially abiding by standard assumptions, such as the local construction of symbolic sense and the non-referential character of ritual behaviour, they still do so on the pretext of universal

translatability: “In our model, ritually displayed red cosmetics invoke and sustain collective representations translatable not narrowly as ‘menstruation’ but more broadly as ‘fertility,’ ‘supernatural potency,’ etc.” (Hovers et al. 2003:513) Furthermore, they seem to assume that such semantic qualifiers are indistinguishable from the original syntax. But syntax is form and structure, not meaning and content. No more do phonemes make sense just by being combined according to certain phonotactic constraints than does a syntactically correct sentence. For example, while the final line in Lewis Carroll’s poem *The Hunting of the Snark* – “For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see” – makes a syntactically correct sentence, it remains nonsensical in terms of its semantic content.

I should not go on to complain about Knight’s hypothesis on the mere account of its unfalsifiability. What bothers me most about it is the gesture of deferral. Not unlike other authors of similar primal scenes, Knight has once more delved into the mythical genre of pseudo-representation. In spite of the Darwinian tinge, the mythical message remains unaltered: we are ourselves represented in the absence of ourselves, transported from a familiar world of perceived artificiality into a sociobiologically triggered world of pure artifice. The female deceivers are no less blindly compelled to deceive their clansmen, because they cannot penetrate the reproductive pressure compelling them to act symbolically in the first place. Nevertheless, there is an arresting detail in Knight’s scenario that merits further consideration. It concerns the symbolic interlinkage between menstrual blood and the blood of brought down game. While exegesis is necessarily an outcome of symbolic behaviour, not its incentive, we need to acknowledge the historical prevalence of such reasoning beyond a modern scholar’s passing fancy.

A case in point is the priestly discourse on menstruation and the sacrificial spilling of animal blood in the Hebrew Bible. As argued by Davd Biale in a recent study, the many prohibitions involving blood in prerabbinic Judaism can be read as encoded expressions of priestly monopoly. Sex with a woman during her menstrual period is considered a violation, because her body is seen as a miniaturization of the temple

(Biale 2007: 37–38 [Lev. 15:31]). Prohibitions designed to negatively index temple sacrifice – idolatry (Ezek. 33:25), the consumption of blood (ibid.), slaughter according to standards foreign to temple sacrifice (Lev. 17:3–6), etc.– are all considered to defile the land, because the purity and sustenance of the land is thought to ensue from the sites of priestly dominion. Male voluntary action – in this case sacrifice, "*the artificial (i.e. ritualized) killing of an artificial (i.e. domesticated) animal"* (Smith 2001) – is the exegetical point of departure. Its symbolic potentiality does not reside in what it essentially already means, but in its propensity to artificially construe itself anew. In its particular relation to the biological fact of menstruation, the artificiality of sacrifice takes imaginary precedence over all that, at first sight, appears indispensable, involuntary, and natural.

The circumstance that similar modes of analogical reasoning are found in ancient Greek writings, such as the Hippocratic tract *Diseases of Women* ("the blood [in a healthy woman] flows like that of a sacrificial victim"), by no means suggests that the analogy informed the incentive to sacrifice in the first place. On the contrary, the social fact of sacrifice has apparently invited all sorts of secondary speculation, none of which should be considered less socially constrained than the other. However, if there is anything that conjoins the ritual treatment blood with other aspects of symbolic behaviour (e.g. red-ochre burials), anything that might help us to identify a cross-cultural matrix, I believe that the common denominator must be sought outside the sphere of implied sense.

Symbolic acts are never universally recognizable – neither ethnographically, nor in archaeological retrospect – because of what they universally mean, but because of what we can infer about them in their capacity as symbolic acts. A minimal criterion of such acts is that they bring forth more or less tangible social artefacts. Social because they are collectively sustained and regulated, artificial because they do not emerge by themselves. Whether palpable or intangible, symbolic artefacts need to be mediated and decoded according to a locally received protocol. Moreover, such acts are cosmetic. They remain so in the

broadest sense of that term, because they impose a new and arbitrary order upon the world. Since red matter (including blood and ochre) figures so saliently in human culture as a visual medium of symbolic representation, we may assume that it did so on account of what it allowed human populations to do in spite of what such actions occasionally meant. Interestingly, the earliest securely verified impositions of arbitrary forms on physical matter occur on 75.000–100.000 year old pieces of ochre from the Blombos Cave in South Africa (Henshilwood, d'Errico, and Watts 2009). If we imagine ochre to have been exploited by early human populations for purely symbolic purposes, then the manufacturing of such incised artefacts reveals not just symbolic but even 'meta-symbolic' capacities, on a par with writing on a crayon. As minimal tokens of archaeological recognition, visual signals are not symbols in terms of what they imply outside of themselves, but rather act as cues for the symbolic action in which they participate. They are the visual traces of a socially sustained and regulated world that, for the most part, remains tacit and invisible.

Sacrificial blood may very well fulfil a similar task. In its quintessential capacity as a visual display of the artificial procedure in which it participates, the spurting blood of the victim makes the ritual community intensely aware of itself. Consider, for instance, the ritual of the so-called blood covenant described in Exodus as being performed by Moses in front of the people at the foot of Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:5–8). The passage presents a ritual sequence in which burnt offerings and offerings of well-being to God are first performed at the altar. Half of the blood is then sprinkled upon the altar while the rest is collected in basins. Moses reads from the book of the covenant in the audience of the people. "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey," they community replies. And finally "Moses took the [other half of the] blood and threw it on the people, saying, 'Behold the blood of the covenant that the lord has made with you concerning all these words [i.e. commandments].'"[30] Blood does not surface in this passage as a

[30] I follow David Biale's translation of the Masoretic text (Biale 2007:39–40).

currency of ritual transaction, but rather serves – even in this discrete context of narrative imagination, as a ritual performed *once and for all* at a critical point in the myth of the Jewish people – to emphatically visualize and substantiate the validity of the ritual statement itself.

The treatment of blood in Greek animal sacrifice is no exception. Unlike the consecrated bones on the altar, blood is not overtly displayed as a gift to the gods. The only exception would be the so-called *haimakouríai*, satiating offerings to the dead in the netherworld. In public sacrificial ritual, blood is rather the visual signal of the sacred act as such. Emphasized by the shrill tones of the female participants, the "staining with blood" (*haimássô*) of the altar marks the emotional climax of the ritual performance (Burkert 1987:56).

I have already touched upon symbolic behaviour in its evolved capacity to artificially elicit emotions, sensations, and interpretations. Admittedly, the most spectacular and least durable enactments of this capacity do not amount to less, but they need not primarily do so with an appeal to intellection, perhaps not even to imagination. Among the ritual events most persistently theorized by priests and scholars we also need to include those of no, or at least very little, semantic significance to the casual ritual participant. A sudden and forceful stream of blood should count among those catchy ritual signals, alongside bursts of light and the joyful noise of ringing bells, which convey very little information apart from the instantly appealing (or shocking) emotions that they evoke. Yet, in their ability to evoke such emotions they are no less social, no less artificial. They are cooperatively employed to move the human mind beyond the immediately apparent world of lax sensations.[31] Blood and other red colorants, including the lumps of hydrated iron oxide placed upon the bodies of the dead at the Qafzeh cave, have shared in adding depth and visual substance to this prolonged human project. It is primarily from this shared ability, I submit, that we should

[31] I am reminded of Leibniz's enthusiasm for fireworks and other spectacular effects produced by gunners and magicians. Instead of regarding such spectacles to be worthy of contemplation in themselves, however, he was confident about their employment as rhetorical devices to stir the mind toward rational pursuits (Werrett 2010:69).

proceed when further exploring what such symbolic media may have in common.

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Abstract
The ritual use of blood (both human and animal, by proxy, and as a tangibly real bodily fluid) has fascinated students of religion for a long time. This paper raises critical questions as to what the ritual use of blood may be universally held to "mean" and as to how this discussion can be brought to bear on the problem of religious symbolism as a whole. Examples from the academic discussion of Paleolithic burial and ancient (pre-rabbinic) Judaism are used as points of departure.

Key words: blood symbolism, palaeolithic burial, menstruation, Sinai covenant