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God on trial

Human sacrifice, trickery, and faith

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What would the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac look like through the value magnitude of Chukchi sacrifice, and vice versa? Drawing on the Dumontian idea that a dominant value contains its contrary within, I show that what counts as the dominant value in each of the two sacrificial traditions is so deeply co-implicated that trickery (Chukchi) becomes the shadow of faith (Abraham), and vice versa. At certain moments, one dominant value or the other is captured by its own shadow and flips into its contrary. This reversibility takes place against a "paramount value" shared by both traditions: the necessary hierarchical distance between humanity and divinity. All of this allows us to reconsider Abraham's trial in a manner that is precisely contrary to most prevailing interpretations—namely, as an act in which God is put on trial by Abraham.

Keywords: sacrifice, value, Abraham, Kierkegaard, faith, Chukchi

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"To sacrifice" translates in religious terms as "to make sacred" (Carter 2003: 2), but then there is "to sacrifice" as a verb and "sacrifice" as a noun. Where the former implies faith as an irrevocable commitment to divinity, with no expectation of a material gain, the latter takes on the form of utility or even trickery, in which something relatively insignificant is given away to the divine for the sake of a greater profit. This notorious slippage between faith and utility is also suggestive of the philosophical distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value, which is typically introduced in contradistinction. The value of an item is said to be instrumental when it serves as a means to some practical end (Bradley 1998; Bernstein 2001: 330). Intrinsic value, by contrast, is not valued for any other end than its own sake, and "the phrase 'end-in-themselves' is used as being synonymous with intrinsic value" (Axinn 2010: 10).

This contrast stands at the core of more than a century–long debate that tries to situate sacrifice in one or the other value category—a debate predicated upon a more or less finite and fixed opposition of faith versus utility and intrinsic versus

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instrumental value. Many religious and philosophical studies have emphasized the thesis of non-instrumental value of sacrifice in which faith, as an end-in-itself, is its supreme purpose. There is the paradigmatic biblical story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to demonstrate his faith in and his valuing of God for their own sakes, which I shall discuss below. Anthropologists, by contrast, have tended to see sacrifice in instrumental value terms, as a means of gaining certain utilitarian effects, be these of an economic or symbolic nature.

However, I believe that the value issue in sacrifice remains in question and that these distinctions are fundamentally misleading. My argument is not simply to recall the tired cliché that a multiplicity of values is involved in sacrifice (Beattie 1980: 38). Rather, I want to make a much stronger point here and argue that the co-presence of contradictory values is, in fact, crucial for the workings of sacrifice *as such*. To demonstrate this, I take my inspiration from Louis Dumont's comparative anthropology and engage in a cross-cultural comparison of two sacrificial traditions. The first is the well-known story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac; the second is the sacrificial practice of the Chukchi, a group of indigenous reindeer herders in northern Kamchatka, among whom I conducted long-term fieldwork.[1] At first glance, it might seem as though these two traditions differ quite sharply in what they posit as the value of sacrifice. The binding of Isaac is often interpreted as a story about a profound religious experience, the ultimate act of faith. The Chukchi, by contrast, emphasize utility as the major goal of sacrifice and even use trickery to this end. The two traditions seem to suggest two antagonistic value logics.

On closer inspection, however, the two traditions actually encompass their apparent contradictions within—that is, the dominant value of a sacrifice duplicates itself all along with its opposite, which, as a kind of shadow, comes to haunt its presence. There are moments, as I will show, when a sacrificial form that predominantly acts as a bearer of religious faith in and for itself is captured by its own shadow and collapses into its opposite, an investment for personal gain, and vice versa. All of this makes it difficult, in fact impossible, to specify whether in sacrifice we are dealing with intrinsic or instrumental value, faith, utility, or trickery. These values constitute the flip side of each other and are so deeply co-implicated in sacrifice that one depends on the others for its existence.

Dumontian comparativism

I am aware that anthropology has, to varying degrees, tended toward skepticism if not outright disbelief regarding the possibility of making sweeping comparisons, such as the one suggested here between the binding of Isaac and the Chukchi sacrificial practices. The two are so utterly separated by time and place that they cannot "really" be connected. However, the kind of cross-cultural approach that I envisage here is one that works from the principle of what André Iteanu (2009: 335), following Dumont, calls a "comparative displacement." This perspective admits to the fact that social phenomena tend to be so different in different places

1. My fieldwork was done in Achaiyayam, a village of about four hundred people, which is located close to the border between Kamchatka and Chukotka. For the most part, the people here speak a dialect of the Koryak language (Chavchuven), but they call themselves Chukchi.

that they cannot really be compared. Maurice Bloch (1992) made this point with regard to the category of "sacrifice" when questioning the very assumption that it can be defined universally. However, according to the Dumontian framework, cross-cultural comparisons are indeed possible, but to be valid they must be restricted to elements of "analogous magnitude" (Iteanu 2009: 336). This means that comparisons must be sought between elements that have a similar amount of valorized weight within the societies in question. Seen from this point of view, the Chukchi emphasis on ritual trickery and the Abrahamic emphasis on religious faith represent equal values, for the simple reason that they are dominantly shared as supreme in the societies to which they belong. This implies that Abrahamic faith has to be compared to the Chukchi's trickery and not to their faith.

Such a juxtaposition of incommensurable values provides us with something akin to what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004: 5) calls "controlled equivocation"—a type of cross-cultural miscommunication—between different perspectival positions. This "relational positivity of difference" (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 12) then allows us to read one formulation in light of another, without conflating them into univocal sameness (see also Schrempp 1992: 11). Following from this, I therefore pose the question: What does an interpretation of the binding of Isaac look like through the value magnitude of Chukchi sacrifice, and vice versa? The speculation I offer is that if we consider Abraham's near-sacrifice not in relation to faith but instead in relation to Chukchi sacrificial trickery, and vice versa, then we encounter another truth altogether about these sacrifices.

Abraham's trial

The binding of Isaac, or the Akedah (in Hebrew), as recounted in Genesis 22 of the Hebrew scriptures, is the story of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to the will of God: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there" (Gen. 22:2). Abraham sets out to obey God's command without any questioning. Isaac is put on the altar, and Abraham takes the knife to slay his son. Then, an angel of the Lord calls out from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him! Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Gen. 22:12). Abraham turns around and discovers a ram caught in a nearby bush, and he sacrifices the ram instead of Isaac. For his obedience, Abraham is promised that he will become the father of generations as "numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore" (Gen. 22:17).

The meaning of the near-sacrifice of Isaac has been the subject of debates, studies, novels, plays, and works of art for centuries (Kessler 2004: 31). And yet, "only certain kinds of questions have been asked and certain voices given expression" (Delaney 1998: 22). According to the standard Christian exegesis, this episode is a trial in which God tests Abraham's faith. Abraham submits to God's will, showing his absolute loyalty to God, which is why, at the very last moment, God sends a ram to substitute for Isaac. In this view, Abraham's willingness to give up his son is seen as foreshadowing the willingness of God to sacrifice his own son, Jesus, to atone for humanity's sins. The New Testament thus becomes the revelation of what was concealed in the Old (Kessler 2004: 54).

In his book *Fear and trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard ([1843] 2005) provided a theological interpretation of the Abrahamic story; this is the reading that arguably

has had the most scholarly influence. Here, Kierkegaard celebrates Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac as the paradigmatic example of an act of religious faith. Abraham is, according to Kierkegaard, the one who must deny humanity's most sacred moral value ("thou shalt do no harm") in favor of a higher religious value (the command of God). If Abraham had been asked to sacrifice Isaac to deal with some terrible but inescapable necessity (to save his family, for example), rather than as a test that serves no comprehensible purpose, then Abraham would have inscribed himself within the logic of instrumental value. But Abraham is called upon to leave any such instrumental rationality behind. Abraham did not understand God's ways, but "he had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago" (Kierkegaard 2005: 25). Once Abraham eradicates the last remnant of hope from his heart and is about to perform the sacrifice, he makes the leap into absolute, unswerving faith and becomes a "knight of faith," as Kierkegaard (2005: 57) calls him, who acts freely and independently of whatever it is that he earthly loves. The true price of faith, Kierkegaard insists, is the "horror religiosus" (2005: 44), which is the fear and the trembling of Abraham as he embarks upon the dreadful task that makes no human sense.

Having briefly followed the customary Christian interpretation of the story and Kierkegaard's influential portrait of Abraham as the knight of faith, we must ask some blunt questions here. In particular, can we believe on good authority that the story is simply about blind religious faith? The traditional interpretations, along with Kierkegaard's exegesis, do not question this but simply assume that because God commands Abraham, he obeys. Yet, when reading the story of Abraham, one is left to wonder: Why does Abraham not utter a word in protest when God demands that he sacrifice his son? After all, as Carol Delaney (1998: 22) reminds us, Abraham does not hesitate to argue with God when trying to save Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction. Is it simply that Abraham remains silent, as Kierkegaard suggests, because he does not understand what he is doing? How would that fit with the fact that, according to certain versions of this story, Abraham is so keen on completing the sacrifice that he begs the angel "to let him bring forth at least a drop of blood" (Delaney 1998: 121)? It seems that Abraham is quite clear-headed in wanting to fulfill the task.

The plot becomes even more interesting when going through this extremely minimalist text, which provides no descriptions of Abraham's emotional state, for we then discover that the only really desperate voice emerging is that of the angel, God's own messenger, who calls to Abraham to abandon his mission: "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him!" (Gen. 22:12). Why this sudden shouting? We may well ask: What would have been the consequence for the unfolding of the biblical saga had Abraham in fact succeeded in sacrificing Isaac to the Lord?

Curiously, these questions have rarely occurred in commentaries on Genesis 22, and thus it is imperative to provide some possible answers. In doing so, I keep in view Dumont's (1986: 225; 1977: 211) crucial point that a dominant value never stands alone but contains its own contrary within, which is what it then denounces. By this, Dumont means that a dominant value always lives with other values, which may not be clearly visible, but which lie in wait to upset their dominant counterparts. Borrowing from Eugenio Trías ([1969] 1983), I give these values the name "shadow" (see also Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007; Strathern 2011).

This implies that any valued interpretation of the biblical story does not simply pass on a particular message, but that it also simultaneously invents its own negative referent or shadow, which is stalking it all along on the very edge of visibility. Indeed, were we to follow Dumont's scheme, the best way to disclose this unrecognized shadow would be to apply what can readily be known about it from a society where this type of value is, as he puts it, "clear and distinct" (Dumont 1980: 262). Hence, my Dumontian-inspired reinterpretation of the binding of Isaac involves asking if and how much we can learn about the shadow of Abraham's faith by considering it in juxtaposition to its supposed contrary: the value of Chukchi sacrificial trickery.

Sacrifice against faith

An essentially prosaic mindset appears to underlie Chukchi sacrifice. As Waldemar Bogoras (1904–09: 290) writes in his classical monograph on the Chukchi, "Many times when witnessing sacrifices . . . I asked to whom the sacrifice was being proffered. The answer was, 'Who knows!'" Still, Bogoras (1904–09: 340) takes some pains to point out that "the average Reindeer Chukchee . . . is very positive about the details of the sacrifice and about various acts connected with it." One possible implication of this is that the efficacy of Chukchi sacrifice does not depend on any strenuous commitment to faith, for the rite of sacrifice is somehow thought to be effective as long as the ritual rules are followed. Caroline Humphrey (2001: 416–17) makes a similar observation when she writes, "To take part in shamanist rituals does not require a personal commitment of belief. . . . Shamanism demands nothing . . . which must be taken into the rest of life as a personal commitment."

Shamanic types of rituals, including Chukchi blood sacrifices, are therefore not really judged in relation to an abiding question of faith. They are not metaphysically significant and have no higher role that would imply putting the sacrificer in touch with some divine reality. Instead, it is mostly profane questions of cost and gain that matter. Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994: 11) encapsulate this point, stating that "the question most insistently asked of shamans is, 'Has it worked?'" This is a far cry from the Kierkegaardian outline of the Abrahamic story, where the key question posed is, "Do you have faith?" Chukchi sacrifice becomes, in this sense, the reverse side—indeed, the antithesis—of religious faith, and it works, as we shall see, largely on the basis of trickery.

The chain of substitutes

As Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss ([1898] 1964: 100) pointed out long ago, "The very nature of sacrifice [is] dependent, in fact, on the presence of an intermediary, and we know that with no intermediary there is no sacrifice." In other words, it is the substitution that defines sacrifice as sacrifice and which distinguishes it from other related forms of death: suicide, martyrdom, and murder (Smith and Doniger 1998: 191). But what is so crucial about the role of the substitute? Its fundamental role is that it allows for a shell game of displacement and replacement wherein violence is effectually transferred away from oneself and toward another—a victim—who nevertheless must be identified with oneself on the symbolic plane.

In the Siberian north, the substitute is prototypically a reindeer, which stands for the person or persons who are making the sacrifice. As Evans-Prichard (1954: 27) puts it with regard to the Nuer, "When [they] give their cattle in sacrifice, they are very much, and in a very intimate way, giving a part of themselves." This is clearly true of the Chukchi as well, who identify very strongly with their livestock. During the autumn festival, which is accompanied by sacrifice, the blood of the first reindeer slaughtered is used to paint designs on the face of the one who owns it (Bogoras 1904–09: 360), which clearly suggests that the sacrificer here takes on the identity of the victim. Notice, however, that the sacrificer does not literally kill himself; rather, it is a reindeer that is killed. In sacrifice, then, the Chukchi are saying that they want something: "Oh High Spirits, this is for you, make the herds thrive!" But in order to obtain it, they are making a *vicarious* killing—allowing, so to speak, the sacrificer to have his cake and eat it, too.

This element of trickery is further emphasized by the fact that most often it is not a real reindeer but a surrogate for the beast that is killed. The prototypical surrogate is a "sausage" made by stuffing the third stomach of a reindeer with fat from its intestines, but a fish or a stone might also serve as a substitute for the sausage; even a small wooden image of the sausage may be used instead (Bogoras 1904–09: 369). Each substitute takes the place of a real reindeer and therefore is stabbed with a knife to represent actual slaughter.

However, all these substitutes are not considered to be equal but are organized in a hierarchical order. The grading moves from the most complex, highly esteemed, and rare, to the simpler and more common. A reindeer doe, for example, is more valuable than a reindeer bull, which in turn is more valuable than a sausage, which is more valuable than a wooden image of the sausage, and so on. The chain ends with the minimally acceptable substitute: a stone.

The troubling fact, however, is that the value hierarchy of substitutes is shadowed by its contrary, so that in a certain sense, the lowest is also considered the highest. Before we elaborate on this further, let us consider the question of whether the instrumental rationality and trickery of Chukchi sacrifice can really be introduced in contradistinction to the intrinsic value of religious faith. To begin this discussion, let us reconsider Abraham and his supposedly unprecedented stance of faith.

Abraham as the "knight of poker"

For Kierkegaard, as we have seen, Abraham is celebrated as the knight of faith who left all instrumental calculation behind. But could it be that the Chukchi value on sacrificial utility and trickery allows us to see a less mysterious side of Abraham's faith, which perhaps, because of its simplicity, has been almost entirely overlooked? Clearly, there are significant advances that Abraham gains from following God's command. Abraham had already been promised that his lineage would go forward through Isaac, and as Kierkegaard (2005: 15) himself admits, Abraham therefore predicts that God would have to resurrect Isaac from the dead if he were to complete the sacrifice. What, then, is Abraham actually risking by sacrificing Isaac? Nothing, really. In addition, God later tells Abraham that he will be the father of countless nations. Indeed, due to God's promises, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all call themselves the "children of Abraham." Notice that God's promises concern *this world*—a kind of earthly immortality—not some light-hearted promise of a

sweet hereafter. Indeed, one can hardly think of any other human figure who achieved so much reputation, legacy, and fame as did Abraham.

While there is little uncertainty about Abraham's steadfast faith in God's vast powers, it is an open question if he is really to be praised as a peerless knight of faith who was tested to choose between the two most sacred values: faith against life. The archetypical figure of Abraham could just as well be exposed as the "knight of poker" who was peddling with faith to attain unprecedented earthly immortality.

At stake here is the value involved in the story. Is Abraham ready to give up his son's life simply to demonstrate his faith in God? Or is his faith more about gaining weighty divine favors? In the first case, we are talking about sacrifice as a sacred act, which produces a kind of nonmonetary or inherent religious value—the standard of faith. In the latter case, sacrifice is a utilitarian act, aimed at giving up something relatively insignificant to gain something of much greater worth.

The Abrahamic question is a long-contested matter within sacrifice studies. On the one side, we have theologians, such as Edward Kessler (2004), along with philosophers such as Sidney Axinn (2010) and George Bataille ([1967] 1991), who each in his own way have supported the nonmonetary value thesis of sacrifice. Bataille ([1967] 1991), for example, famously argues that the value contained in sacrifice lies in the absolute profitless destruction of surplus use—a momentary escape from the cold calculation of the "restricted economy." On the other side of the debate, we have a number of anthropologists, from Edward B. Tylor ([1871] 1958: 375–410) and E. E. Evans-Prichard (1956: 197–230) to Maurice Bloch (1986), who, although they rarely discuss the story of Abraham, have generally seen sacrifice as serving some sort of instrumental value, whether in the form of purposeful gift exchange or of society's reproduction of power and authority.

However, to my mind, what appears as we proceed through Genesis 22 is the discovery that Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac invents *two* value principles at once: the message of religious faith, which we tend to accept as the real one, and its exact inverse—that is, sacrifice as the cold calculation of personal gain in which the most desirable thing in the world (i.e., earthly immortality) is gained from God at a cut-rate price. The two, I believe, are not really opposites, but belong together as *reversible*, which, "unlike other expressions of counterpoints—for example, contraries, antithesis, or polarities . . . are opposites that self-contain themselves" (Corsín Jimenéz and Willerslev 2007: 538). For exactly this reason, a value may be captured by its own shadow and become the inverse of what it supposedly signifies. To give some substance to this claim, I will return to exploring the conundrum play with substitutions.

The value of human sacrifice

Dumont (1980; 1986: 224–25) points out that a hierarchy of value implicates specific assumptions about commensurability—that is, the notion that the various sacrificial substitutes can be measured only by a standard of equivalence, making them commensurable with one another. The question to ask, then, is the following: According to what overall value principle is the hierarchy of substitutes organized? Or, to put it in the vocabulary of Dumont (1986: 38): *In-relation-to* what "paramount value" does the chain of substitutes take its worth?

Sacrifice, we have seen, is always a shadow of itself in that it is an act of surrogation, an imitation of the literal self-sacrifice of oneself. As Smith and

Doniger (1989: 191) state, "The least symbolic of all sacrifices is the suicidal human sacrifice, in which the symbol stands for itself." Paradoxically, however—and here I recall Hubert and Mauss's substitutionary etiology—the suicidal sacrifice remains unmediated by substitution and, as such, cannot qualify as sacrifice (Willerslev 2007).

Nevertheless, self-sacrifice might actually serve as a gauge of the worth of sacrifice. Certainly, the notion of a divine self-sacrifice being the primordial sacrifice appears in numerous myths around the world.[2] Here, I will restrict myself to briefly considering the two myths that are of importance for my comparative exercise. The story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, as already pointed out, is considered by Christian religiosity to be a revelation of Christ's sacrifice. Jesus was the "God–man," Christ, which implies that the Holy Father and the human son are of the same essence; they are one (Hefner 1980). Hence, when God sacrifices Jesus to reconcile humanity's sins, what God is in fact doing is sacrificing himself to himself. In the Chukchi tradition, one finds a number of rather obscure stories that stress the same theme of a divine self-sacrifice. Here, the creator of the world, the trickster figure, Raven—also called "the self-created one"—kills or eats himself so as to then resurrect himself from the dead by vomiting himself back onto the face of the earth (Bogoras 2007a: 67; 2007b: 33, 39–40).

My point is that although self-sacrifice is *not* sacrifice (except in the paradoxical realm of myth), it can nevertheless be seen to function as a kind of unattainable prototype, or rather ideal, through which a substitute's value is ultimately measured. If this is so, then what is considered the most valuable of all possible substitutes, the one that approximates the divine self-sacrifice most completely?

It comes as no surprise that both within the Abrahamic and the Chukchi traditions the sacrificial killing of a human being or, more precisely, of a beloved family member is proclaimed as the highest of all possible victims. The human kinsperson is the ultimate victim, with animals and other surrogates as inferior substitutes.

In biblical studies, there has been a fierce debate about whether ancient Israelites used to practice child sacrifice or if this was a religious practice restricted to neighboring groups, such as the Carthaginians (see, e.g., Levenson 1993; Delaney 1998: 69–104). In theological terms, this is a vexing question, as it frames how Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac is to be understood: as the introduction of a new norm—"abolish human sacrifice, substitute animals instead" (Spiegel 1967: 64)—or as a protest against the "barbarous" practice of their neighbors. Although I find the question interesting, its resolution is not important to my argument. What is important is the fact—and I would expect both sides of the debate to agree with me on this—that to the ancient Israelites, the sacrifice of a beloved family member, most notably a son, as Isaac is to Abraham, was considered the "theological ideal,"

2. For example, in Nordic mythology, Odin, who was also called the "God of the hanged" as men and animals were strung up in his honor, was said to originally have died by hanging, as a sacrifice to himself (Frazer [1911] 1959: 467). Similar myths of divine self-sacrifice are particularly common in Near Eastern mythology: the Egyptian god Osiris and the Mesopotamian god Tammuz are good examples (Livingstone 2002). This theme is also apparent in Indian mythology (Smith and Doniger 1989).

though perhaps not a binding code. And so, Abraham is valued for his willingness to go through with it.

Among the Chukchi, human sacrifice is, as a matter of ethnographic fact, a customary practice. In the early ethnographies, it goes under the name of "voluntary death," and it involves the killing of a close family member—often ill and aged—who expresses a wish to die (Bogoras 1904–09: 561–62). Voluntary death has often been mistaken for an archaic type of active euthanasia, but as I have argued in detail elsewhere (Willerslev 2009), it is really a human sacrifice. Accordingly, the killings are usually accompanied by fairly elaborate ritual arrangements, which have a striking resemblance to the sacrifice of reindeer. In fact, Bogoras (1904–09: 562) describes how a person who desires to die a voluntary death often declares, "Treat me like a reindeer." Moreover, after stabbing the kinsperson in the heart with a knife or spear, the living family members often paint their faces with the dead person's blood, as they would do with the blood of the sacrificed reindeer, as a gesture of identification with the victim.

Voluntary death as the leap of faith and the ultimate trickery

Thus far, I have stressed the instrumental rationality of Chukchi sacrifice and contrasted it with the psychology of religious faith. But what happens when one is confronted with the killing of a beloved family member? We get a sense of this in a story told to me by a woman, whom I shall call Nina, who killed her sick, elderly mother. Although the account is somewhat atypical in that the killing is not at all ritualistic and that it is not the mother herself who gives her consent, the story is interesting for our present discussion.

> My mother had been ill for a year or so, just lying in bed. One night, I had a vivid dream. I saw my mother's sister, who had been dead for years, together with three other women. I suspect that they too were relatives. My mother's sister first spoke to me: "You must send your mother to us. We are waiting for her." One of the other women said, "Don't worry, your mother will return again." When the dead speak to you like this, you must obey. I walked to my mother's bed, and put my left hand on her forehead and pushed her trachea with my right hand. She took off [died]. Surely, now I get all terrified by the thought of it. But at the time, I was acting with a strange determination. . . . Years later, I got pregnant. My mother showed herself to me [in a dream]. I knew she had come back [as the baby].

Can we see the demand of the spirits to kill her mother as a test of Nina's faith? I believe so. Ethically speaking, Nina's duty to love her mother remains binding, even though it is breached by the higher obligation to give her mother's life to the spirits. It is precisely this tension—the painful opposition between desire and duty—which gives rise to "horror religiosus" (Kierkegaard 2005: 44), or the fear and the trembling of Abraham's dreadful task. Yet, like Abraham before her, Nina follows the divine command without protest and with the belief that her mother will be returned to her. This suggests a qualitative shift in perspective akin to the Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" by "virtue of the absurd" (Kierkegaard 2005: 40).

I am not claiming that the two narratives are identical or necessarily share all of the same features, but I believe that we may detect strong continuities and

crisscrossings, which suggest that both stories can be seen as paradigmatic acts of religious faith.

My point is not simply to show that Kierkegaard has a meaningful place among the Chukchi. Rather, it is to draw on Dumont's notion that a dominant value encompasses its contrary—to show that in sacrifice, faith and instrumental rationality, and intrinsic and instrumental value, are not to be conceived in terms of finite and fixed ontological oppositions, but rather as flip sides of each other. The two may well alternate as the dominant value (figure) and the shadow (ground) within a given sacrificial tradition, but each contains the other within itself and may, therefore, take the place of the other.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1974: 175–78, 192–96) pointed to exactly this reversibility between faith and trickery when famously retelling the story of a Kwakiutl Indian skeptic, who took on the shamanic profession because of an urge to expose the tricks of the trade. The Indian learned all the tricks; yet, this fake shaman had great success as a healer and started to believe in shamanic powers. What Lévi-Strauss reveals is the shadow of trickery, of duping, in any conventions that call for faith. We also saw this reversibility in relation to Abraham, who, even if customarily celebrated as the knight of faith, is also the knight of poker.

My point is not simply a structuralist one, which implies that "the anthropologist would continue to set up (a matrix of) contraries and then find [values] trailing their opposites" (Strathern 2011: 33). Rather, the proposed model suggests that we should look for co-presence, for what in any particular value configuration is always there shadowing the visible. But, as Marilyn Strathern (2011: 34) warns,

> it would have to be a co-presence of creative potential, so that it was able to turn what had been visible into the shadow of another form, summon another world . . . the anthropologist at this juncture has to be ethnographer; there can be nothing a priori about journeying together [a value] and [its] shadow.

In other words, the ethnographer's focus must be on indigenous preoccupations. Can we ethnographically detect the value reversibility of faith and trickery in Chukchi human sacrifice? We can, because here, too, as we shall now see, the ultimate leap of faith is also the ultimate act of trickery.

The Chukchi understand the spirit world in terms of experience reversed: the spirits are said to live lives identical to the Chukchi themselves. Yet, basic things are turned upside-down and inside-out: when it is night in this world, it is day in the spirit world; the same goes for time, which among the spirits is understood to be the direct inversion of ordinary forward-running time, so that the old turn young and vice versa. Accordingly, when an old person dies in this world or the other, the soul will return through rebirth in a newborn baby. The child's family, among the living or the dead, will then give the child the name of the deceased person he or she is believed to be, and the child will take, at least formally, that person's place within the wider network of kin (Willerslev 2009). For this reason, the deceased are said always to be eager to receive the souls of the dying, because they experience it as the physical return of long-gone relatives.

And this is where the act of trickery enters the scene. What from the viewpoint of the living is considered an old, decrepit person on the verge of dying is seen by

the spirits as the greatest of gifts: a newborn baby. In other words, when the living carry out a human sacrifice, they are turning what in practical terms is a worthless person into a perfect sacrificial victim. So, although the real act of killing a beloved kin member may confront the sacrificer with the fear and trembling of the dreadful task, it also represents the ultimate act of trickery. The spirits are given what they most desire; yet, in utilitarian terms, the investment comes close to zero.

The paramount value of divine distance

We have seen that sacrifice is always a substitute for an unattainable ideal—the sacrifice of oneself—which functions as an ideal in relation to which the worth of any actual sacrificial substitute is valued. Both Abrahamic and Chukchi sacrifices strive toward realizing this ideal, by using victims of ever greater worth, which ultimately culminates in the sacrifice or the attempted sacrifice of a beloved family member. Within both traditions, the human kinsperson is considered the highest, optimal sacrifice.

However, we are faced with a puzzling difficulty here, in that although it is clear that the chain of substitutions is hierarchically ranked, those lower on the ladder are not only the victims most often used in sacrifice, but are also in some important sense considered the best victims.

In the biblical story, we see this in the fact that God quite overtly forbids Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham wishes to go ahead with the task, but ultimately he is not allowed to carry out the optimal sacrifice. Among the Chukchi, we can detect something similar in that human sacrifice is always accompanied by the sacrifice of victims of the lowest worth, such as the killing of a wooden reindeer or stone. The Chukchi even say that the lowest substitute in the chain, the stone, is in certain ways the equal of the highest victim, the human being.

How are we to understand this claim of equivalence between the highest and the lowest? Here, at first, it would seem that the hierarchical order of substitutes is overturned and rendered meaningless. But rather than the collapse of the hierarchical order, what we encounter here is a feature that sustains the very system.

I have described how the Chukchi do not postulate an insuperable barrier between humans and spirits, because people are seen as reincarnations of ancestral spirits. However, this does not mean that the Chukchi are not preoccupied with differentiating themselves from their dead ancestors. On the contrary, the spirits of the dead are conceived not only as associates in giving life but also, and perhaps even more so, as enemies in demanding it back (Bogoras 1904–09: 336–37). As among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 154), the spirits are considered the true owners of the souls of the living—humans and animals alike—and they may at any given moment take possession of their property by spreading epidemics or by forcing people into accidental deaths or suicides (Willerslev 2009: 698). In other words, distance from the spirits is of paramount value, and the lack of any definitive a priori distance means that it has to be constantly created through sacrifices that demonstrate it. So, what Georges Gusdorf (1948: 23) says of sacrifice in general—that "it is made not only to the gods but *against* the gods" (my emphasis)—is true for the Chukchi as well, whose overall intention is to keep the spirits in their rightful place: at a distance from humans. This is not to say that Chukchi do not seek the effects of spiritual blessings, such as good weather or an abundance of reindeer. Rather, the point is that such fullness of life is

preconditioned on the spirits' divine supremacy, which, in turn, demands that the hierarchical distance between the humans and spirits is not collapsed.

The religious thinker Jean-Luc Marion (2001: 56) makes essentially the same point with regard to the human-God relationship in Christianity. "God is distance," he claims, because only distance protects the infinitude of God and establishes the corollary that we, as finite beings, are radically dependent on God: "God is manifest only in distance."

What I am suggesting, then, is that divine distance is shared by both value systems as "paramount"—that is, it is the ordering dynamic *per se*, which structures the relations between all the other values it contains and hence the overall structures of the two religious schemes. However, as a paramount value, it does not operate on the subjective cognizant level; it is not necessarily something intentionally valued by people within the two societies. They value faith in one instance and sacrificial trickery in the other. Rather, divine distance is paramount in the sense that it constitutes the ontological imperative order that these two respective values uphold, much like how Dumont (1980) describes that "purity" in India keeps up the entire cosmological order.

It is important not to mistake divine distance for an absolute separation of man and divinity. Rather, the point is that a hierarchy of distance is the very condition through which human proximity with the divine is made possible. It is, I venture to suggest, exactly with this effect in view that a sacrificial victim of the highest worth among the Chukchi always must be followed by a victim of the lowest worth, so that the substitution becomes double. The crucial role of the lower substitute is to pull back, so to speak, the higher substitute's movement toward proximity to the divine ancestors, thus securing their crucially hierarchical distance. In this sense, we can speak of identification between the lowest and the highest substitutes, because they are so interdependent that one cannot really work without the other.

If this is so, and if the hierarchy of distance really is what defines divinity as divinity, it allows us to reconsider Abraham's trial in a manner that is precisely contrary to most prevailing interpretations — — — because what appears to be at stake in the story is not really the life of Isaac, whom, as we have already seen, God would have had to resurrect if sacrificed. Rather, at stake is the very hierarchical distance that signifies God's celestial supremacy. Had Abraham completed the sacrifice, his trial would no longer have foreshadowed Christ's sacrifice, but in fact would have actualized it, with the result that the crucially necessary distance between humanity and divinity would have collapsed with humanity now acting on the same plane as the divine. This possibly is the real reason that God had to make his lavish promises to Abraham, offering him unprecedented earthly immortality to keep the hierarchy in place. And perhaps Abraham sees his chance to turn the precarious situation to his advantage and keeps silent, eager to fulfill the task, which would effectively make him equal to God. If this is so, then what starts out as a trial in which Abraham's faith is tested reverses into a trial in which God's divine supremacy is tested. I admit that all of this represents a quite contrary reading of the story—nonetheless, it is possible, because in sacrifice, a dominant value always contains its shadow within, flipping faith into trickery.

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Dieu mis à l'épreuve : le sacrifice humain, la ruse et la foi

Résumé : À quoi ressemblerait l'histoire du quasi-sacrifice d'Isaac par Abraham vue à travers l'ordre de valeur du sacrifice tchouktche, et vice versa ? S'appuyant sur l'idée de Louis Dumont qu'une valeur dominante contient en elle-même son contraire, je montre dans cet article que ce qui compte comme valeur dominante dans chacune des deux traditions sacrificielles est si profondément co-impliqué que la ruse (Tchouktche) devient l'ombre de la foi (Abraham), et vice versa. À certains moments, l'une ou l'autre valeur dominante est capturée par sa propre ombre et retourne en son contraire. Cette réversibilité s'oppose à la « valeur primordiale » partagée par les deux traditions : la distance hiérarchique nécessaire entre l'humain et le divin. Ceci nous permet de reconsidérer le procès d'Abraham d'une manière qui est précisément contraire à la plupart des interprétations en vigueur, à savoir comme un acte dans lequel Dieu est mis à l'épreuve par Abraham.

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