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THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE

The ancient Phoenician sacrificial practices unveil a primordial ritual order which seems to include in its cultic codes initial elements of the proto-Hellenic and proto-Semitic sacrificial traditions. Called *kena'ani* or Canaanites, a word which was adopted as *kinahna* in Akkadian, the Phoenicians moved into the area of modern Lebanon around 3000 BC, at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, centuries before Sargon of Akkad and Naram-sin, his grandson¹, founded in Mesopotamia, in the region where the Tigris and the Euphrates are closest to each other, the city of Agade and the first empire in history². In the same way as other Semites, the Phoenicians worshipped El as the chief figure of their pantheon³, which comprised also Asherah of the Sea and Astarte as goddesses.

The above outline of the early Phoenician history must be corroborated with the scanty, even if significant, data about the ceremonial-religious establishment. In his fragmentary preserved *Peri Eusebeias*, Theophrastos (*ca.* 372-287 BC), the successor of Aristotle as the leader of the *Lyceum* in Athens, refers to gruesome rituals consisting of human sacrifices and anthropophagy, performed during the archaic times in the western Mediterranean region⁴. The Bassaron and the Tauron are thus connected with "the smoke of human sacrifices", with the eating of human flesh and with animal cruelty (Fragment 3). Mention is also made about the Egyptians and the Phoenicians, who "would much prefer human flesh instead of a tender beef" (Fragment 6). The "hunger" of the Athenians, on the other hand, is described as having been generative of "inhuman things", among which the sacrificing of the first born as "nourishment", after their limbs were consecrated and dedicated to the gods, is thrown into relief (Fragment 6). In Theophrastos' anthropological and sacrificial chronicle, the proto-Semites, "the Syrians, from among whom the Jews belong", share in the same ritual habits, as long as "a deficiency of food sources" compelled them to use "the

¹ The Akkadian Empire under Sargon's dynasty lasted from *ca.* 2300 BC to *ca.* 2150 BC.

² Cf. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 1, p 192; vol. 9, p. 392.

³ As a name given to the supreme god, El is equally recognizable in the Babylonian Baal, the Jewish Elohiim, and the Arab-Muslim Allah, as well as in the particle *-el* or *-al* designating in the Near East and Chartage some of the leaders and kings of mythological or historical origin (*e. g.* Asurbanipal or Sardanapal, Hannibal). In the Khirbet Qumran Library, the plural *elim* designates the angels, while in the Biblical literature *-el* states the participation of the angels and archangels in the divine sphere (*e. g.* Rafael, Gabriel).

⁴ Cf. Theophrastos, *Peri Eusebeias / About Piety*, Potscher, pp. 152-155, pp. 172-177.

flesh of their fellow men to eat" (Fragment 13). If in Arkadia, Lykaia and Karchedon the "sprinkling of the altars" with the blood of the human victims is reported as part of the public display of human sacrifices, the cultic "robbing of life" and devouring of the human flesh is utterly condemned as a "crime" (Fragment 13). The animal sacrifice or "blood of the bull sacrifice" is mentioned as well, in a brief history of the ritual offerings presented to the gods, as the middle term of an evolution mounting from the immemorial giving of fruits and crops to the gift of the human lives (Fragment 13).

One of the most ancient sacrificial traditions preserved in a written form is the Akkadian ceremonial service prescribing the daily offerings to the gods Anu, Antu, Ishtar and Nana. The text about the daily sacrifices to the gods of the city of Uruk was recovered from the "tablet written by the hand of Shamashetir, son of Inaqibitanu, son of Shipkatanu", and copied "from tablets which Nabuaplausur, king of the Sea Land, carried off as plunder from the city of Uruk". The text reveals not only a sacrificial event at random, but rather a complex and ritually detailed priestly practice: "(Bellow are enumerated) the bulls and rams for the regular offerings (to be made) every day of the year to the deities Anu, Antu, Ishtar, Nana, and the (other) gods dwelling in the Resh Temple, the Irigal Temple, and the Esharra Temple, (which is) the topmost stage of the temple-tower of the god Anu. From the first day of the month Nissannu through the thirtieth day of the month Adaru, (they shall be offered) for the main meal of the morning". The sacrificial service of the "main meal" of the morning consisted therefore, in order, of seven first-class, fat, clean rams, one fat, milk-fed *kalu*-ram, one large bull, one milk-fed bullock and ten fat rams. While slaughtering the animals, the slaughterer had to utter the sacred formula: *Mar Samas belu buli ina seri usabsa ri'iti*. It is interesting to note, in the same context, that the ancient text implicitly describes the sacrificial event itself as an act of "speaking life" or as a "language of life": "Similarly, while slaughtering the bull(s) and ram(s), the chief slaughterer shall speak life to the deities Anu, Antu, the Great Star, and the planet Venus; he shall recite (it) to no other god".⁵ The definition of sacrifice as pure and true life is fundamental for the theological and anthropological understanding of the most ancient sacrificial traditions.

In ritual terms, the "language of life" can also be disclosed as a "language of war", the "war" or the inner tragedy of the ritual bloodshed being semantically invested with the value of a cultic metaphor for the sacred violence. From this perspective, the human sacrifice is designated by the syntagm "a war particularly severe" in the exegesis of the *akedah* of Isaac, as

⁵ Cf. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, pp. 343-345.

stated in the Oral Law or *torah shebalpe*⁶. The sacrifice is the intermediary term which consolidates, at the climax of a significant crisis, the dialogue or relationship previously existing between "the king" (Elohiim, God of Israel) and "his mighty warrior" (Abraham). The moral strength and the steadfastness proved by the sacrificer during the *actio sacrificia*⁷, which is supposed to be accomplished in the flesh and blood of a human being particularly dear to God, enables Him to prove and to increase the value of all "the earlier wars", of all the offerings which attain their climax and are epitomized in the hypothetical shedding of Isaac's blood: "... The matter may be illustrated by the parable of a king of flesh and blood who had to face many wars, in all of which he had one mighty warrior who invariably achieved victory. In the course of time, he faced a war particularly severe. The king said to the mighty warrior, I beg you to stand with me in this war, that mortals should not say 'The earlier wars were of no substance'".⁸

The sacrifice which would have followed the *akedah* of Isaac was a burnt-offering⁹. Its meaning, absolute submission of men to God, resides in the ascent of the victim, after the parting of the hip muscle and of the hide, to God through the heat and the light of the fire. In exchange for the pleasant smoke of the victim, the omnipotent collocator is sending his answer in time and history. The message or word of God, *davar Elohiim*, reaffirms the human sacrificial "substance" of the "earlier wars", and thus allows the earthly subjects of the king to solve the crisis by the influx of new and imperishable power of life. The question asked by the incandescent agency of fire and sacrificial blood is answered by the all-embracing power of the word of God, which supplies the energies needed by the general purpose of the welfare of the community.

In the Greek universe, the *thysia* can be approached as a ritual limit which sets up the equidistances defining the human society as a middle term between the world of beasts and the realm of gods. As preeminent collective ceremony, the sacrifice polarizes all the energies and purposes of the *polis*, inaugurating in this way what could be termed the sacrificial self-awareness of the political community during its exile inside the sphere of time, history and ephemeral existence. The consubstantiality of the religious ideals and the political tradition is marked by "the difficult equilibrium" of the sacrificial

⁶ Cf. *The Palestinian Talmud, Tanhuma, Va-yera*, 22-23, and *Taanit*, 2, 4; *The Babylonian Talmud, Tanhuma, Va-yera*, 46, and *Sanhedrin*, 89 b; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, 31; *Pesikta Rabbati*, 40, 6.

⁷ The sprinkling of the blood on the altar, the moment when the soul of the victim ascends to God, while the blood poured on the earth releases all its mystical and purifying might.

⁸ Cf. *Sefer ha-Aggadah / The Book of Legends*, pp. 39-42.

⁹ Hebr. *'olah*, "ascending"; Gr. *holokauston*, "holocaust".

ritual, as expressed by Jean-Pierre Vernant¹⁰. The instability of the equilibrium consists in the narrowness of the ethical path which could be walked between sacrifice and murder, between the moral prohibition concerning the *hybris* of bloodshedding¹¹ and the praising of the cultual services and offerings¹² as a pious action attempting to communicate an essential message to the gods of the city.

When facing the dilemma of the Greek sacrifice, we deal in fact with the myth of Narcissus reversed. The rational *psyche*, well aware of its irrational abysses, is far from falling in love with its own image, the negative reflected in the waters of human consciousness. In fact, the *logos* strives to eliminate the *non-logos* as a challenger for supremacy in the citadel of human psychology, condemning it to oblivion and realizing in the same time with stupor that convict and judge, out-law and executioner represent an indivisible unity. A complex feeling of shame, guilt or even terror is triggered by the acknowledgement of this irreducible identity, and reveals itself as the subliminal spring which ultimately releases the *ololyge*, the cry uttered by the sacrificer at the climax of the sacrificial ritual, when the blood of the victim is shed and the message of life ascends towards the divine realm, where *theoi* or "the receivers of the smoke" treasure it and send back the message of renewed and all-powerful life. The sacrificial "comedy of innocence"¹³ is rather a carnival of rationality.

Therefore if the taming of the irrational can be successful only at a fictitious level, where the narrative labyrinth of the myth stands as a paradoxical deliverance from the ethical confrontation between sacrifice and killing, the whole staging of the sacrificial ritual¹⁴ seems in fact to be merely a humble and wise attempt to cope with the irrational, with the good and evil dynamics of the human thought, in the same time civilized and chaotical, clear and obscure, dangerous and alleviating, ferocious and blissful. Transfigured by the intermediary presence of the all-pervading logic of the ritual, the irrational is ephemerally disguised into an apparently unharmed and serene epiphany of the language of life.

The reason, as the appolonian constituent of the Greek spirit, expresses itself by a twofold structure of power: the sacrificial order and the political

¹⁰ Cf. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Sacrifice et mise à mort dans la *thysia* grecque", in *Le Sacrifice dans l'antiquité*, p. 18.

¹¹ Manslaughter and beastslaughter alike.

¹² Including the slaying of the victims' bodies and the pouring of the blood before the eating of the meat during the communal meals.

¹³ Cf. Karl Meuli, *Griechische Opferbrauche*, in *Phyllobolia. Festschrift P. Von der Muhll*, pp. 185-288.

¹⁴ Gestures, objects, actors, formulae, incantations, music and rhythms.

order. The allotment of power, implied by the exercise of the social conventions, is predetermined by the measure in which the individuals and the communities share in the sacrificial act and appropriate parts of the sacrificial inheritance or patrimony, material-sacramental and spiritual-theological elements included. The sacrificial area, conceived as a liturgical and sacred space¹⁵, becomes a religious-political symbol of the city as a whole. The ritual gate between the sacred universe and the profane universe also reveals itself as the center of the spiritual power able to guarantee the potential absorption of the entire *polis* in the intensely contemplated realm of the divine, the residence of purity and immortality.

In the words of Marcel Détiéne, "there is no political power which could be exercised without the sacrificial practice"¹⁶. The beginning of military campaigns, the actual engagement in battle with the enemy, the conclusion of treaties, the meeting of the assemblies, the commencement of any magistrature, the founding of a new colony¹⁷, all depend upon the go ahead signal which was to be given by the sacrificial act.

The partition of the sacrificial meal, at the level of the ritual, reveals itself as a division of power within the city. Complementary to the private identity of the *thysia*, the public dimensions of the sacrificial ceremonies involve the political order of the *polis*. The sphere of politics is ultimately the recipient and the historical embodiment of the sacrificial message, order and ethics. At one end of the scale is situated the tyrant, who disregards the freedom and the rights of his subjects, proclaiming his absolute authority over the area of sacrifice, over the ritual treasure located in the liturgical precincts and the potential benefits to be acquired through the language of life. More than that, oft-times the tyrant enacts the religious-political *hybris* of identifying the mass of his fellow-citizens with the *thysia* itself, with the victims of the sacrifice, immolating in a ruthless way the very human beings who entrusted to him the burden of governing. The shedding of the blood of one's own kin constitute *phonoï*, the worse of the murders, and unleashes within the boundaries of the *polis* the scourge of *akosmia* or disorder, which makes imminent the gods' doom. At the other end is located the isonomical city, established on the fundamental principle of the equality of rights or equality before the laws, which is, in fact, nothing but a translation in political terms of the parting of the sacrificial meal in equal shares.

¹⁵ The place where the hearth is located, where the unextinguished fire is guarded by the priestly caste.

¹⁶ Cf. Marcel Détiéne, "Pratiques culinaires et esprit de sacrifice", in *La Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, p. 10.

¹⁷ The bringing of a container filled with fire from the hearth of the metropolis was essential for the favourable result and for the good omen of the founding process.

In the referential system just sketched above, the communal sacrificial banquet must be regarded as the "productive and reproductive act of the political equality"¹⁸. Therefore taking part in the public meal instituted by the intrinsic *isonomia* of the sacrificial act is tantamount to learning the political alphabet, a *rite de passage* which integrates the individuals into the sacrificial-political order of the *polis*. The tyrants, the murderers and the outcasts have transgressed the precepts of the sacrificial code by a hypertrophy of violence and bloodshed, which defines an acosmical or anarchical *psyche*, not suitable to be contained anymore in the ritual order of the *thysia*, in the transcendental reality of the language of life.

In contradistinction to the political order of the democratic city, founded on the isonomical sacrifice, the sacrifices performed in the sanctuaries situated beyond the boundaries of all the cities are uncensored by the constraints of the civilized behaviour. At Delphi, in Apollo's temple, the sacrificial ritual acquired savage features, which brought it close to the hunting habits of the beasts of prey and to the relentless yet lucid fury of the professional warriors¹⁹. Such places of worship and sacrifice stand as the last ramparts of the irrational and *akosmia*, maintained in a world subdued by the cities, by the oxen's trod and the coulter of the plough. They represent the minimal or accepted level of the irrational, and also, if necessary, its always ready to gush out wells, as a hidden but all too real frame of violence and wild spiritual power underpinning the tamed and organized universe of the *polis*, from the inexhaustible depths of which new energies administered by the divine realm may appear at any time in order to support the tough undertake of the human survival.

The language of life is the ideal limit which is able to express the distinction and the continuity between identity and otherness, realm of the human beings and realm of the divine, *kosmia* and *akosmia*, *polis* and chaos, the rational *psyche* and the irrational *psyche*.

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¹⁸ Cf. Marcel Détiénne, Jesper Svenbro, "Les Loups au festin ou la Cité impossible", in *La Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, p. 225.

¹⁹ Cf. Marcel Détiénne, Jesper Svenbro, "Les Loups au festin ou la Cité impossible", in *La Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, p. 235.

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