

Sacrifice: Ritual murder or dinner party?

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THE TYPICAL LAYOUT of an ancient Greek sanctuary indicates the kind of activity for which it was designed. The temple building itself, which frames the cult image of the deity, is further encircled by a wall—the *temenos*—in order to make room, within the sanctified space, for the open-air altar on which burnt-offerings are made. The sanctuary is designed for sacrifice.

‘Sacrifice,’ the word generally used to translate the Greek *thusia*, was by common consent the essential form of worship in ancient Greece. The word also happens to be one of the most intractable terms in the theory of religion. The various attempts over the last one and a quarter century to explain what sacrifice is form a long list:

Sacrifice has been categorized as a gift (an offering), a means of communication between the profane and the sacred, an attempt to establish reciprocity between the human and the divine realms (most often expressed by the formula, ‘I give in order to get’), an expiation, a substitution, and a reenactment of primordial events,

to quote *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, which here lists the more classical theories.¹ In addition to all these conflicting general theories about sacrifice, dissenting voices can also be heard which reject the notion of sacrifice altogether as a meaningful cross-cultural concept: “‘Sacrifice’ is only a word, a lexical illusion,” says Jean-Louis Durand in an article about ancient Greek sacrifice (Durand 1989:89). ‘What exists,’ he goes on to say, ‘is the *thusia*, and it is to be considered as such in terms of its own organization, territory, and boundaries.’ At the other extreme is Walter Burkert, himself a prominent authority on Greek religion, who in his *Homo Necans* and subsequent works has described sacrificial killing as ‘the basic experience of the “sacred”’ (1983:3).² Animal sacrifice is, according to Burkert, not only a universally found phenomenon in traditional

1 *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, gen. ed. J.Z. Smith, San Francisco 1995, s.v. ‘Sacrifice.’

2 Cf. also Burkert 1976, 1979 esp. 54–56, 1981, 1985 esp. 55–66, 1987.

cultures, it is also basically the same phenomenon everywhere because it expresses an innate characteristic of the human species: in the ritual of bloody sacrifice *homo sapiens* is revealed to himself as the ape that kills for food.

This approach adds a further difficulty still, which is that 'sacrifice' becomes *the* religious phenomenon *par excellence*, putting at stake the whole taxonomy of our concepts in the theory of religion. If Burkert is right, other religious phenomena must somehow be subsidiary to or derived from the ritual of animal sacrifice.³ The situation is confusing. It calls to mind the proverbial story of the group of blind men who, confronted with an elephant, tried to define the whole of the animal on the basis of the part that each of them happened to feel with his hands. In this case there is even doubt that we are dealing with the same animal. Does the Greek *thusia* really belong to the same species as the *nak* of the Nuer?

In this paper I shall limit my observations on this complex issue to a discussion of two recent positions in the study of Greek sacrifice. Both of them represent highly influential current frontline scholarship on Greek religion as such, besides offering the greatest interest for the general theory of sacrifice in the history of religions. The first is the position of Walter Burkert, the other that of the so-called Paris school represented by Jean-Pierre Vernant and his collaborators. Their approaches are very different, and my main concern will be to describe this difference and to try to understand how it may be accounted for.

In a direct encounter with Burkert some twenty years ago, Vernant himself succinctly summed up the difference between them by saying: 'Sacrifier, c'est fondamentalement tuer pour manger. Mais, dans cette formule, vous mettez l'accent plutôt sur *tuer*; moi, sur *manger*.' (Rudhardt and Reverdin 1981: 26). Burkert and Vernant both recognize, as anybody must, that the ritual of Greek animal *thusia* embraces the ritual killing of the victim in front of the altar as well as the communal consumption of the meat afterwards. Beyond this, however, there is a difference in perception and emphasis between them, and this difference is apparently related to more fundamental methodological issues.

When the Paris group approaches sacrifice, which it does in particular in the volume *The cuisine of sacrifice among the Greeks* (Detienne and Vernant 1989), the ritual is perceived as a statement. By sacrificing, the performers make a declaration about who they are. It is a collective statement about group identity: it says that humans are distinct from gods as well as from animals, that pastoral and agricul-

3 Cf. Burkert, in Hamerton-Kelly 1987:212. This is also the situation we find ourselves in with the other theory of sacrifice which has received a great deal of attention in the last couple of decades, that of René Girard (*La Violence et le sacré* [Paris 1972], *Le Bouc émissaire* [Paris 1982]), who identifies the scapegoat as the essence of animal sacrifice; on this view, sacrifice is a mechanism for diffusing violence, a mechanism which in turn becomes the universal key for explaining religious rites and myths in general, as well as human society as such.

tural civilization is distinct from the savagery of hunting tribes, and that Greeks are distinct from barbarians. It is through the eating that all these things are expressed. The sacrifice unites humans and gods in a shared meal, but at the same time it sets them off from one another: mortals eat the decaying parts of dead animals while the immortal gods receive the perfumed smoke of the burned bones, elements which are associated with the life itself of the victim, the life which has been separated from its body by the act of immolation. Hesiod's Promethean myth expresses these ideas: the commensality of gods and humans in the primordial age was broken by the rebellion of Prometheus. After this rupture, humans had to work hard constantly to produce food in order to stay alive. In the sacrificial rite they demonstrate their dependence on corruptible nourishment and their inferiority to the gods at the same time (Vernant 1989a).

On the other hand the sacrificial meal also signals the distance between humans and wild animals: humans eat the products of their hard work of cultivation—domestic animals and wheat, prepared by the help of fire. Wild animals eat their food raw. Animals of prey hunt their food and kill them as enemies, whereas humans eat animals they have bred themselves and which in a sense are also their companions in the labour of civilization—most prominently of all the ox.

The performance of sacrifice thus effects the distinction of humans, gods and wild animals, and classifies these categories in a hierarchical system. The classification is constitutive of the self-understanding of the civilization of the Greek city state. Deviant attitudes such as Orphic and Pythagorean vegetarianism on the one hand, and Dionysiac *omophagia* on the other, stand out as the positions of aberrant sects, which by their refusal of normal sacrifice not only transgress the boundaries between humans and gods, in the case of the Orphics, and those between humans and wild animals, in the case of maenadism, but also undermine the ideology of *polis* civilization. They are the exceptions, which by the very fact of their marginality confirm the rule (Detienne 1989:5–8).

Moreover, sacrificial practices are also a way of identifying cultural otherness. Herodotus describes the sacrifices of Egyptians and Scythians as a way of delineating their difference from the Greeks. Because the Egyptians construct the relationship of gods, humans and animals differently from the Greeks, they will not in their sacrifices use utensils touched by a Greek, considering them unclean (Hdt. 2.41; Detienne 1989:3).

The Scythians, who choke their victims to death and do not accord the gods their proper shares, thereby show themselves as primitive and uncivilized (Hartog 1989). On the other hand, the Ethiopians eat at the table of the sun meat that does not have to be cooked, but which grows spontaneously from the ground; they still share that commensality with the gods which the Greeks have lost (Hdt. 3.17; Vernant 1989b).

We cannot here discuss the many details in the Paris group's analyses. What interests us is the type of analysis they offer. Their approach is to treat the sacrificial ritual as the focal point of a symbolic system representing the self-understanding of Greek culture. The symbolism is elucidated through the study of ideas found in texts. Hesiod's *Theogony* becomes the charter myth for sacrifice (especially for Vernant), in a fashion which is not unlike the way that myth and ritual have been traditionally correlated by historians of religion: the ritual becomes a reenactment of a foundational myth.

Without detracting anything from the stimulating insightfulness of these analyses as far as they go, it may nevertheless be objected that they are not entirely satisfactory as interpretations of *rituals*. When rituals are studied as webs of significations, there is always the risk that we lose sight of the qualities that make them just rituals—the qualities of the physical, the corporeal, the kinaesthetic, the sensory. In general I believe that studies of rituals can be observed to have proceeded in two basic directions. If rituals are symbolic acts, one trend has been to concentrate on the symbolic, losing sight of the act, the other to focus on the act and disregard its symbolic intent. The Paris group, reading Greek sacrifice as a text, comes close to this first type of onesidedness. Going back to Vernant's statement about the difference between him and Burkert, we might therefore venture to correct him by saying that it is not actually the eating itself that he accentuates in his interpretation of sacrifice, but the significance that the Greeks attributed to eating. More accurately still, it is not so much the symbolism of eating that forms the focal point of their analyses, as that of the preparation of the meal: the carving and the cooking.

Burkert on the other hand, who focuses on the killing, wants to take us to a level which is below the symbolic. For him, sacrifice is in our guts. If animal sacrifice is a sacred act, it is because it is a killing, and killing becomes something sacred because it arouses anxiety, an anxiety about the extinction of life which is specific to the human species. This anxiety was activated at the hunting stage, when humans learned to kill to feed themselves, and it maintained itself after they became pastoralists. By ritualizing the killing, including giving back parts of the dead animal to where it was thought that its life came from, humans found a way of simultaneously expressing and overcoming this anxiety.

So in the beginning was *die Angst*. Regardless, however, of how one may try to describe and identify the psychological mechanisms involved, it seems clear that Burkert's approach is to trace back human rituals to biologically programmed patterns of behaviour. Killing for food activates one such pattern, which manifests itself in the most common form of animal sacrifice. Food sharing, giving of gifts and submission to the stronger are other patterns, which are also activated, not only in animal sacrifice but in other forms of sacrifice and religious rituals as well,

and which there may be given greater prominence. The issue then is ritual: 'In principle,' he says, 'ritual reflects a preverbal state of communication, to be learned by imitation and to be understood by its function. It seems to be more primitive and may be more ancient than speech; it clearly has analogies in the behavior of animals' (Burkert 1996:19).

It is this distinction between the verbal and the preverbal which forms the more fundamental difference between Burkert and Vernant. If Burkert highlights the killing in sacrifice, it is because he focuses on the ritual as a nonverbal physical act; by concentrating on the eating (or, rather, on the cooking), Vernant on the contrary sees ritual as a symbolic system on the level of language. The difference between them thus seems to correspond to the basic cleavage of approaches to the study of ritual that we mentioned earlier. Could it be, though, that both are somewhat one-sided? After all, both killing *and* eating are indispensable parts of the normal Greek sacrifice (leaving out holocausts and unbloody offerings). Also, rituals are physical acts *and* have ideological meaning at the same time. Could it not be that it is the combination of these two features and the relationship between them that should command our attention?

Rituals are, of course, essentially something we do with our bodies. In this regard, a distinction can be made between rituals and *ritualization*. Ritualization is what we do when we perform acts with increased deliberation and emphasis—acting ceremoniously, as we say. It is a mechanism for focussing attention and enhancing presence, and apparently constitutes a universal faculty in the human species. Ritualization is something we may engage in spontaneously when we move or speak. *Rituals* on the other hand are institutionalized and socially recognizable forms of ritualization. There are other distinctions too which seem to impose themselves: ritualizing behaviour must, it seems, be distinguished from body language in general—gestures, grimaces, *etc.*—because ritualization implies a greater degree of conscious deliberation in the performance of the act. Human consciousness also seems to intervene to make ritualization in our species distinct from what is called ritualized behaviour in animals. If self-consciousness is constitutive of human ritualization, we seem to be dealing here with a different phenomenon from that of genetically programmed communicative behaviour in other species.

I realize that we are touching upon some thorny issues here, and I do not propose fully to resolve them. But I do wish to emphasize the self-conscious quality of human ritualization. When we ritualize, we create a distance to our own actions, we objectify them, invite them to be looked at. Ritualizing acts are asking to be seen and understood, they make statements claiming attention. There is an interplay of body and sign in ritual which appears to be quite peculiar. Ritualization turns the body into a carrier of message, but at the same time the message is incarnated in

flesh and blood. On one level, this interplay takes the form of an interchange between acts and words. Verbal formulae seem to be an essential ingredient in ritual. In ancient sacrifice, for example, the verbal component had its place in the form of the invocations and prayers uttered by the sacrificer on behalf of all present in the moments before the killing takes place. 'No sacrifice works without prayer,' Pliny says (*NH* 28.10). The use of language verbalizes the acts which are performed and make explicit in words the fact that these acts have significance and what their significance is. At the same time, however, the use of language itself is ritualized, the performative quality of speech is enhanced—the words are doing things. The interchange of acts and words in ritual corresponds in turn to a dialectic of acting and signifying on the level of both the acting and the speaking themselves. Just as ritual enhances the performative quality of speech, it also highlights the symbolic significance of the acts. Ritual joins doing things with words with saying things with acts.

Now if it is a property of ritualization, and hence of rituals, to fuse the physicality of acts with the ideality of signification, we seem to face some serious problems when we try to explain the origins of specific ritual acts. For in so far as these acts are ritualized they are already on the level of signification, *i.e.* of language. In that case, they will be under the law of the arbitrariness of the sign, and culture-specific. The ritual acts must then be interpreted in the same way as the utterances in a specific language. In fact, this is the position of the Paris school, and which found its clearest expression in the statement of Jean-Louis Durand quoted at the beginning of this paper: there is no such thing as sacrifice in general, only *thusia* exists. On the other hand, however, if rituals also make use of the body in order to produce effects for which bodily sensation is essential, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that these effects will depend on a certain number of constants in the makeup of the human body. The ritual use of meals, a universal phenomenon, is an example of this. The sensual pleasure of eating, which undoubtedly is biologically conditioned, adds to the effectiveness of rituals. The symbolism of the meal, which contains a universe of social significations relative to the culture and the situations in which it occurs, is underpinned by providing gratification of bodily appetites. By this means, the ritual meal also creates an acute sense of presence and inclusion for each of the participants. There is no reason to think that something of the same may not also be the case with ritual killing. Killing an animal is, after all, an emotional affair. Without exaggerating the notions of violence and existential *Angst* connected with it, it may be recognized that the slaughter of an animal is quite normally an act accompanied by some measure of psychological tension. Because of this tension, it is an act which is easily ritualized and associated with taboos in most societies, and especially those based on pastoralism. Long after the introduction of Christianity in Scandinavia, for example, farmers continued to

ritualize slaughter: it should take place on certain auspicious days of the year. Before cutting the throat, one would utter: 'Not out of hate, but for food' ('Ikkje for hat, men for mat'), or the name of Jesus would be invoked over the victim. Pregnant women were barred from watching the killing, as were strangers. The bones might be buried in some inaccessible place (Lid 1924). Similar customs can be attested all over the globe.

Rituals necessarily involve physical acts which create sensation and excitement—pleasure and pain, emotional tension. These are essential in order to make the ritual effective. This observation leads to the question whether it is the ritual, or more precisely, the ritualizing impulse, that with some degree of arbitrariness selects certain acts which it can make use of in the construction of a ritual programme and thereby endows them with significance, or on the contrary there are certain acts whose inherent qualities are such that they are spontaneously ritualized. To speak in Burkertian terms: does ritualization arise as a means of controlling anxiety, or is the anxiety, and other types of psycho-physical reactions, associated with certain acts, more like the raw materials employed in the service of ritualization, because of their potential for arousing emotion? This sounds like a chicken-and-egg question, and to me it seems that we are here reaching the limit of what we are able to resolve.

What does seem clear, however, is that any given ritual is a complex matter. A particular ritual act will always be inscribed into a system involving the syntactic linking of acts in a sequence on the one hand, and on the other a paradigmatic repertoire of alternative forms as well as of semantic variations in the signification of each act. With regard to the immolation act itself, for instance, there is morphological variability in the type of animal that may be sacrificed, and semantic variability as to the interpretation which is most prominent: offering, expiation, or divination (*i.e.* communication). All the classical theories of sacrifice may find their restricted justification in this context. These variations on the paradigmatic axis may also provide the basis for a morphological classification of sacrifices, a thing which has been done frequently. The syntax of ritual is perhaps more interesting, however. Ancient Greek sacrificial ritual exhibits a characteristic sequence of acts which is culture-specific and no doubt must be understood as a consecutive whole. In its most common form there is the procession to the sanctuary, the sacralization of the victim by the sprinkling of water and grains, the invocatory prayer, the actual killing, the carving of the carcass and the division of the portions, the roasting and the boiling, the distribution, and the eating. This type of linking is not necessarily found in comparative rituals elsewhere. The ceremonial procession, for instance, is not universal. But it seems to have been a crucial element in ancient Greece, probably the most represented scene of all in sacrificial iconography (*cf.* van Straten 1995). The procession is a celebration of the worshipping

community, a self-display, denoting, one might suggest, a sense of civilization enclosing the act of ritual killing. Moreover, the linking of the ritualized killing with a meal, though admittedly common, is not found everywhere. It is possible to find ritualized slaughter as an independent act, as well as ritual meals which are ritually unconnected with the slaughter of the meat eaten in it. So there seems to be no necessary link on a more basic human level between killing and eating. If the Greeks joined sacrifice and dinner parties, both in public and privately, this seems to tell us more about aspects of Greek culture and society, than about human nature as such. In general, therefore, the syntactical combinations of ritual elements need to be studied in their cultural specificity.

However, there is, I would suggest, a syntactical deep structure in ritual which they all have in common. And that is the way they relate the physical to the symbolic, by turning bodies into symbols and symbols into bodies. As the ritual proceeds, there is an alternation between elements which emphasize the symbolic and ceremonial with those which highlight the physical and experiential. The sacrificial procession, and the following invocation, represent the first of these aspects, in its purest form, whereas the eating most unequivocally caters to sensual gratification. Between these two poles of the ritual fall the killing, the carving, the roasting and the boiling. These are undeniably physical and emotional operations, but ritualized and set in the framework of the ritual sequence, they become heavily charged with symbolic significance as well. In this context, their symbolic value as well as their physical intensity are both simultaneously enhanced. To what extent these acts should be considered to have generated the ritual itself, because of their inherent qualities, rather than, as we said, to have acquired their qualities by the fact of being parts of a ritualized sequence, we cannot tell. All we can say is that the ritual works.

In conclusion, the different approaches to Greek sacrifice of the Paris group and of Walter Burkert exemplify a basic division in the study of all ritual: that of seeing ritual as a symbolism on the level of language on the one hand, and that of concentrating on the sub-linguistic physicality of ritual on the other. The essential challenge in ritual studies, however, is to try to transcend this dichotomy, and to see ritual as something existing in the interface between semiosis and bodily functions, and even, perhaps, between culture and nature. In that regard, a distinction should be made between rituals, which are cultural constructs, and ritualization, which is that form of human behaviour where the bodily functions and sign-production meet and which underlies institutionalized rituals. The constitutional ambiguities of ritualization are not fully appreciated, I feel, by either Vernant or Burkert, and in that respect their approaches both remain somewhat onesided.

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DISCUSSION

S. *Georgoudi*: Because I agree with you, I can only offer two informations. First, the term 'Paris School' does not exist in Paris or in France. This is a phantasma created in other countries. We were never one thing, a 'Paris School'. Second, we wrote this book 20 years ago. I agree completely with you that it contains a one-sided theory because we placed the accent only on the eating. Not only that, but, for example, we completely forgot that in sacrifice there is a kind of violence. We thought about the distinction cooked/raw, but this is an artificial distinction. It is not a valid distinction in the Greek context. For many years, some of us, when studying sacrifice in the Greek *poleis*, understood very well that this kind of theory was very one-sided. At the time we wrote the book we wanted to express something different to the theories that had existed for many decades. At the moment we wrote it, the book was something new. Now I think the time has come for an auto-critique, from the beginning to the end.

E. *Thomassen*: Well, I used the term 'Paris Group' for practical reasons, rather than listing all the names. It would be very nice if you could write a follow-up. Call it *Twenty years after* or something like that.

E. Gebhard: I am curious about the sacrifices where you do not eat. The paradigm you were discussing dealt with the standard process, but many sacrifices did not involve eating the victim. Holocaustic sacrifices, for instance. In what way would these change your... —or would it in fact influence the schema you were discussing?

E. Thomassen: I was operating on a level above, beyond that kind of discussion, but I think you have to understand the variations on the paradigmatic axis as a system. To understand one type of ritual I would assume that you would also have to understand the other, and why these options co-exist within the system. So in one situation you can have communal eating, whereas in another situation you do not have that. Of course this is correlated with notions about various types of gods, the chthonic and the olympian. This is probably more complicated than that.

E. Gebhard: Yes, those distinctions have been blurred in recent studies. I know you were speaking in a theoretical vein, but the whole idea of sacrifice seems to be linked with ingesting in some way.

E. Thomassen: I would think that a normal type of sacrifice is a very social ritual whereas rituals where you do not eat have a different social function. One way to regard this sequence of acts would be to see it as a reinforcement of social belonging, so that each time you take part in that sacrificial sequence you reaffirm your membership in the community, you make a declaration of belonging here. As a sort of reward at the end you are fed. And you eat together. That sort of mechanism does not come into play when eating does not occur. That ritual must have a different function. But it would still have to be seen in connection, as part of a system, where you can choose for various purposes between one type of ritual and another.

S. des Bouvrie: Thank you very much for your interesting lecture. I think you touched upon a very important point: the question of how culture is created. If there is this difference between the bodily involvement of the participants at the sacrifice, and on the other hand the significance that can be verbalized, then I think you are right in proposing some combination between the two. I have the impression that what we call sacrifice involves two kinds of modes of relating to the world. We are relating consciously to the world in a verbal way, in a logical, analytical way. You might connect it with the left hemisphere of the brain. We are also relating to the world in a non-verbal way, what psychologists describe as insight or intuition. This is a very well-known phenomenon to psychologists, but we are not so prepared to speak about it. The three-dimensional mode of relating to the world and to each other, which is connected with images, with feeling, with empathy, with contrasts, we are not very used to thinking about it, but we can think about what Freud has called 'primary process'—he called it dream processes, but psychologists have recognized that these are processes that go on all day, all the time in our daily way of relating to the world. It seems that in culture processes these right hemisphere functions of imagery, of emotional involvement, of creating similarities and contrasts, are more focused upon. This might explain why in these spheres both imagery and emotional stimulation are prominent, and also this contrast that we know very well from rites of reversal, inversions. I feel it is very important to think of these processes of bodily involvement. I think you are also right in thinking that sacrifice might be a cultural elaboration upon an emotion that I would think is universal: the excitement of seeing some animal die—or a human being—that has been grasped by groups in order to express the unique excitement of meeting the divine. Life and death is something very exciting and intimate—just as the meeting between mortal and divine is a very important contrast.

E. Thomassen: I agree with you.

E. Sikla: Thank you for an excellent lecture. So far the discussion has rightly focused on the killing and eating of an animal. Archaeological literature is full of references to simulacra of sacrificial animals: in a variety of archaeological contexts we find animal figurines that function as simulacra. I would like to hear if you think that this kind of sacrificial offering is part of what you described, or whether you see a semantic difference.

E. Thomassen: The simulacra would be votiv offerings, so they would not be offered as part of a sacrificial ritual. They would be individual oblations, brought by a single person or a small group to the temple. That kind of ritual would be a completely different kind from the sacrificial ritual. I think that the Greeks utilized the killing as a way of making an exciting ritual and an important statement on special occasions, to manifest group identity, to conclude oaths, *etc.* For them I think the ritual killing would be an important signal in very many of these significant ritual contexts. Where I would agree with Walter Burkert is that I would not see this selection of ritual killing as an element in a ritual sequence as something necessary. They could have used something else to achieve the same effect. After all, other societies use other forms to excite people. We do not do sacrifices but we have other means of producing effective rituals. One point I was trying to make is that for a ritual to work you can't just make statements. That's where the Protestant Reformation went wrong. You can't just tell people things, you have to do things, and you have to excite people, and you have to make them use their sensory organs to experience religion. These things can be achieved by various means.

G. Albers: Thank you very much for this highly instructive paper. One is right, as you confirmed, to have feeling that the way Walter Burkert approached animal sacrifice cannot contain all that animal sacrifice and ritual are. I have a small question: you mentioned the labels commonly given, either the approach of Walter Burkert or of the Vernant group—if you were to give a label to the combined approach, the approach you have outlined, what would that label be?

E. Thomassen: Now this is not a manifesto! These are just notions that I have developed working on other types of material. It just struck me one day as I was reading these theories that see ritual as a form of language—and this has been the dominant approach to ritual, in the form of the myth and ritual school or in a more sophisticated form of structuralism, Edmund Leach, for example, in his communication theory of ritual—that they do not explain why people have to do these things. Why don't they just say it? For instance, when people get married, why don't they not just make a declaration? Why do they have to do things like putting rings on their fingers and so on? Ritual theory has to explain the doing of ritual as something unique and a form of expression that cannot be reduced to ordinary linguistic practice.

N. Marinatos: But Burkert does try to explain why we do things. This is exactly his approach, he does try to explain why these ritual acts are effective: because they come out of inborn blueprints. He does give an answer, actually.

E. Thomassen: That's where I am not so sure...