Ritualized Violence: Why Does It Matter?

Ritualized violence is by definition not haphazard or random, but seemingly intentional and often ceremonial. It has a long history in religious practice, as attested in texts and artifacts from the earliest civilizations. It is equally evident in the behaviors of some contemporary religious activists and within initiatory practices ongoing in many regions of the world. Given its longevity and cultural expanse, ritualized violence presumably exerts a pull deeply into the sociology, psychology, anthropology, theology, perhaps even ontology of its practitioners, but this is not transparent. This short volume will sketch the subject of ritualized violence. That is, it will summarize some established theories about ritual and about violence, and will ponder a handful of striking instantiations of their links.

As will be shown, the meanings of both ritual and violence may be contested, and the link between them need not be presumed. However, the worthiness of studying their conceivable link when there is one, can be supported by a glance at two famous examples, one ancient and one contemporary. Consider, first, why it is mandated that the Israelites who took Jericho were to commit themselves to Joshua to the death (Josh 1:17), consecrate themselves (3:5), circumcise themselves (5:3), and march around Jericho seven times on the seventh day blowing horns and shouting (6:15–17), before the walls fell and they laid siege to the city and "destroyed with the sword every living thing in it – men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys" (6:21[1]). That is, how did the initial buildup to the destruction prepare, if it did, people to destroy and also bear on the felt significance of that destruction? Contextual differences notwithstanding, why is it also that the 9/11 perpetrators swore oaths to die, sanctified themselves bodily (by bathing, shaving, applying cologne, arranging clothing), prayed and recited verses

[1] The New International Version of the Bible (NIV) has been used throughout.

of the Qur'an, even expectorated those verses onto clothing, passports, and papers, and shouted before performing the final events which resulted in the collapse of New York's twin towers, the wounding of the Pentagon, an airplane crash into a field in Pennsylvania, and the deaths of nearly 3,000 people?[2] These presteps, prescribed in the 9/11 Last Instructions, similarly to the steps described in the biblical book of Joshua, impel us to contemplate the formalized nature of certain destructive acts. Quite aside from whatever rhetorical purpose these documents may have served (e.g., prescriptive? commemorative? propagandistic? fanciful?), they force us to ponder what ritualization might be expected to add, if anything, for the actors who perpetrated the violence. Even if the lists of preparations were merely hyperbolic and/or immaterial to the actual motives of violent actors, we still are impelled to consider the intended effects of imagined behaviors, and why the behaviors were captured in texts.

Of course, precisely because the above rituals were captured as texts, we must grapple with the matter of evidence, an enduring problem in ritual studies. What kind of evidence provides a window into the actual experience of ritual practitioners? With all the complexities of even identifying a ritual these days, most scholars do accept that something is being experienced and communicated via a bodily event which is not quite casual and which occurs in space and time. Whether or not experience of that event can be captured entirely in texts is disputable. The problem is greater than discerning the experiential realities behind scribal propaganda. Rather, textualization brings with it an intrinsic problem, namely the extent to which discursive reasoning – arguments in language – may capture and represent a ritual's full sensory dimensions.

For instance, how exhaustively may discursive reasoning capture and represent experiences of rhythm, heat, pain, or pleasure, and, for that matter, delight or disgust? For ancient rituals, unfortunately, discursive representation as

[2] Analyzed in Kitts (2010).

captured in texts constitutes the bulk of our evidence. Although we do have a few ritual scenes inscribed in art,[3] some suggestive votive offerings, and ancient Near Eastern figurines concealed within foundation deposits (presumably part of a ritual), the significance of such artifacts is not transparent.[4] Provocative as the documents and artifacts may be, we can get an important sense of what this evidence does *not* capture by glancing at perplexed reports from contemporary ethnographers, who sometimes hit a wall when it comes to grasping visceral ritual experiences such as trance, mind-altering pain, or the ecstatic visions of the living ritual practitioners whom ethnographers study.[5] Beyond the hurdle of translating bodily events into language, there is also the problem of tracing the bodily events' impact, if any, into subsequent feeling or behavior. If we cannot conceptually grasp the full experience of the ritual, how do we conceptually trace its full dynamism into social and personal realities? These issues obviously bear on analysis of any ritual, but include rituals enmeshed with violence.

As an object of study, violence is equally enigmatic. Consider the range of possible meanings for the term "violence." Inflictions of bodily pain or death are straightforward enough, but consider too implied threats (e.g., military displays, menacing postures, manipulation of threatening symbols), rude gestures, verbal abuse, social suppressions and disciplinary behaviors, ceremonial maiming (e.g., scarification, circumcision, finger severing), desecrations of holy sites, agonistic sports, outright war, even restrictive categorizations: the possibilities seem endless! The problem is not simply a matter of violence being

[3] Collon (2003) analyzes ancient Near Eastern dancing scenes, for instance.

[4] The early materials are increasingly rich, though. See studies by, e.g., Bahrani 2008; Collon 2003; Thomas 2012; Insoll 2013.

[5] Ethnomusicologists offer wonderful bridge-views, some by allowing themselves to experience first-hand the rhythms and sensations of ritual participation, and then attempting to capture those sensations in discursive analysis. See Friedson (1996, 2009) and Becker (2004).

in the eye of the beholder. In the ritual context, there is also the problem of locating the violence. That is, what appear to be ritualized acts of violence may generate effects which are not perceivably violent at all or, alternatively, violence may be an indirect result of seemingly innocuous ritual behavior. For instance, a ritual which involves bodily maiming, a seemingly violent act, might generate identity and belonging within a group whose aims are quite pacific, whereas seemingly nonviolent ritual behaviors such as chanting or dancing may bind group members together closely enough to provide a social foundation for outwardly aggressive acts.

The enigma of locating the violence extends to certain political acts which arguably are ritualized. Public executions, for instance, have been argued to be formally staged in such a way as to capture the public imagination and to insinuate sovereign force over not only the executed, but also the witnessing audience (Foucault 1977:3–8). Military marches presumably may arouse similar trepidation or, equally, enthusiasm; the mesh of nationalist and religious fervor, served by prayer, proclamation, and ceremony, has received a great deal of study: strategy and ceremony are not easy to disentangle in some instances.[6] The same may be said of self-damaging displays, such as campaigns of fasting and self-immolation (conceived as necroresistance by Bargu (2014), among others). These may rely on ancient ritual prototypes for form, but also may be geared toward swaying popular opinion against dominant regimes, as we have seen in Turkey, Tibet, Ireland, and elsewhere. However traditional, body-damaging displays may rivet attention and generate discomfort for witnesses, relating to what Morgan has explored as the haptic dimension of imagination (2012). At the same time they may arouse anguish and outrage, and impel political resistance.

[6] See, e.g., Bobič (2012), Hutchinson (2009), and, classically, Kertzer (1996/1988).

As we shall see, violence can have so many different expressions that the meaning of the term is increasingly elusive. As a brief introduction to the academic study of both violence and ritual, this volume begins with the problem of defining violence, and follows by attempting to pin down ritual. Peppering the discussion are examples which illustrate the complexities. An excursus on the cognitive science of ritual concludes Section II. The third section offers a brief exploration of the communicational dynamic of rituals whose overt intent is menace.

Section I: Violence

We begin with the truism that violence, ritualized or not, is in the eye of the beholder. The problem is not simply that one person's violent act is another's heroic feat, but also that seemingly violent acts are often mini-steps within larger strategies for which violence is acknowledged obliquely, if at all. As described in this section, the conceivable ways of imagining, symbolizing, and staging violence are profuse.

Consider, first, the immediate consequences of physical violence – presumably pain, death, or damaged bodily integrity. These are not monolithic in the way they are perceived across cultures. The experience of pain may be repulsive and power-sapping to some, but transforming, empowering, even rapturous to others. As Glucklich has described, this is particularly so for certain members of the religious who seek sacred pain through practices of self-harm (2003:79–105). Pain may have functional value in initiation rituals. It has been argued that pain may be instrumental in flattening realities (Scarry 1987:11, 27, 202) as well as in constructing them, even conferring a quality of "incontestable reality" on that power that has brought pain into being (Beidelman 1997:179; Morinis 1985:166–168). As we shall see, painful ordeals may result in the stunning

annihilation of previously received truths, as well as in epiphanies of new ones. The dynamic quality of pain is a peculiar feature of many religious practices.

A similar elasticity may apply to notions of violent death. Musing on Simone Weil's famous "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," Sontag observed that violent death is perspectival: for Weil it makes bodies into things, but for others it makes martyrs and heroes (Sontag 2003:13). We hear endlessly that Americans fear both pain and death, whereas martyrs for various causes seek those experiences (Cook 2007), even when pain and death bring no ostensible heavenly reward, as among the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) (Schalk 2010). Memorial tributes to the violently dead (such as murals of martyrs, walls of names, mounds of skulls or eyeglasses), as well as commemorative performances (such as passion plays, eulogies, poems), may be said to defeat the finality of death in the hearts and memories of a beholden public.[7] Then there is an added complexity when death is seen not as instantaneous, but rather as an extended process lasting for months or years, and ritually demarcated at intervals along the way (Shimazono and Kitts 2013). Thus, death's very definition may be socially circumscribed.

Bodily integrity, likewise, is socially and also personally circumscribed. At the simplest level, one person's bodily mutilation or scarification is another person's badge of identity or of beauty, and probably has been so since our first self-decorating ancestors (Schildkrout 2004; Bahn 1998:70–81). Beyond the issue of painful rites, skin itself increasingly is scrutinized as an interstitial thing. Skin-marking or altering is said to speak to the fleshiness of intercorporeality (Ahmed and Stacey 2001; Shildrick 2001:11), as not exclusively about projecting outward an internal self, but rather as reflecting the porosity between inner and outer and between oneself and others. Donna Haraway has challenged not only bodily but also species autonomy, preferring instead to

[7] See Kitts, ed., for an array of religious perspectives on martyrdom (2018).

examine the intersectionality among ourselves and other creatures at the level of inter-species engagement, even at the level of the colonizing bacteria in our bodies and the evolutionary feat of symbiogenesis (2006).[8] New and exciting rubrics have been launched to ponder fleshly experience and modification (e.g., tattooing, artificial limbs, transplants, sexual reassignment). Disputes about alterity, hybridity, and monstrosity characterize an emerging discourse about the body, in art, religion, and bioethics.

Beyond the level of philosophical inquiry, there is the more ethnographic matter of varying historical perspectives and social contexts for pain and bodily integrity. The problems may be illustrated by a glance at the initiation rituals among Mende secret societies during the civil conflicts in Sierra Leone in the 1990s. Charged with defending their communities against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the Mende's Kamajors, or hunters, were initiated into their defensive roles by methods that a Westerner might deem painful, distressing to bodily integrity, or even viscerally repulsive. By rumor, Kamajors ritually cut initiands' bodies, applied immunizing potions to the cuts – thereby inducing scarification – supervised initiands' consumption of concoctions containing human tissues or organs, and dressed them in clothing and artifacts constructed by ritual means. These last included specialized jackets, masks, charms, and amulets made of severed body parts. For the Kamajors, the cutting and scarring, reputed cannibalism, and wearing of corporeal amulets were explained by traditional invincibility metaphors: the goal of the rituals was not pain, damage, or shock, but rather empowerment and transformation (Wlodarzcyk 2009:27–49, 81–91; Ellis 1995). Successful initiands were thought to repel bullets and to defy gravity. As Richards put it, they were "dressed to kill," that is, transformed and committed (2009). Their less traditional opponents simulated these same practices with concocted ritual expressions and invocations of obscure spiritual authorities.

[8] Overarching summary provided by Vasquez (2011:165–169).

As Wlodarczyk notes, Kamajor strategies were persuasive on the battlefield. Not only the practices but also the rumors of the practices intimidated opponents, thereby resulting in concrete effects (2009:83–91). Thus, while the violence in these practices was not ignored by practitioners, it was subsumed within strategies of immunization against wounds and of fortification of defensive powers, to which their opponents gave witness. The violence, if acknowledged at all, resonated in terms shaped by tradition.

In the contemporary West, the subject of violence is highlighted in both popular and scholarly discourses. Popular thinking has tended to consign violent acts to outbreaks of anarchy, primitive atavism, social contagion, personal disengagement and the like, while some social scientists and religious historians now contemplate the possibly constitutive roles of staged violence in social institutions and religious imagination. The subject is vast.[9] The discussion that follows sketches violence in popular imagination and social experience, then in theories based in anthropology and religious performance, and finally as a perennial product of human societies, according to some theorists.

Popular Perspectives on Violence and Its Effects

It has been claimed that popular conceptions of violence, as presented in the media and casual discourse, eschew outbreaks of violence as wild, meaningless, a fall into chaos or immorality, and in need of suppression or redirection by the totality of society (Whitehead 2007:40; Aijmer 2000:1). But much is left out of these conceptions, even within the arena of popular opinion. First, on the largest scale, the last century's ethnocides, the way they are memorialized, and their lingering psychodynamics among victims and perpetrators are anything

[9] On the link of violence with religion in its myriad manifestations, see Juergensmeyer, Kitts, and Jerryson, eds (2013). See Juergensmeyer and Kitts, eds (2011), for excerpts of theories from traditional scholars on the subject.

but meaningless, as the psychologists of collective trauma have taught us (e.g., Volkan et al., 2002); rather, they shape consciousness and culture in a variety of ways for generations to come. It would be frivolous to downplay the real as well as the cultural consequences of campaigns of destruction conducted on a state or societal scale. Symbolizations of such campaigns dot the public landscape as poignant reminders of wartime cruelties. Skull racks from Rwanda and Cambodia; murals of martyrs in Egypt, the Philippines, and elsewhere; concentration camp memorials from World War II; the 9/11 wall of names; and other shrines to victims of violence are conspicuous features not only of the public landscape, but also of public memory. Such exhibits resound with meanings. Presumably pacific by design, they also inflame anguish and enmity and precipitate calls for revenge, while at the same time offering sites for pilgrimage and public grief. Memorials are represented not only by shrines, of course, but also by performances. Song, drama, dance, art, and poetry venerate the fallen, as they have done since the time of the Homeric epics. Arguably, in this era of global media and public memorials, popular awareness is more informed than ever before about human-on-human violence.

At the same time, the plenum of violent spectacles in popular culture has also spurred a trend to reflect upon and to decry our obsession with the staging of violence in art and media. Some, with Baudrillard (2002), attribute our hunger for such spectacles to nostalgia for an irrecoverable dimension of "the real." By this postmodernist theory, twenty-first-century consciousness is hit by a numbing blitzkrieg of media-based, violent simulacra – not just photos and memorials, but violent simulations in the form of games, dystopic novels, horror films, and trauma art. Our attention yanked from one spectacle to another, we reputedly stare at violent spectacles because we crave a sensuous connection with things that has been lost. Trauma art has become infamous as the new ritual stage. As Siebers argued, by staring at mangled, lifeless bodies, we search for aesthetic meanings which reach beyond the plain fact of death or mutilation; instead, the

altered, damaged, or dead body becomes a hyper-canvas for contemplating the significances we once pondered through religious stories and rituals (2003). Historians of Near Eastern antiquity will attest that such hyper-canvases, whereon the specter of bodily mangling is highlighted, are not recent, but rather millennia old.[10] Nonetheless, in this era of bloody videogames, ISIS beheading videos, and snuff films, Siebers's point about the present-day fascination with trauma art is an indisputable one.

Yet, over the past few decades some have proffered counterarguments, claiming that contemporary audiences find spectacles of violence and its effects not fascinating, but rather routine, boring, even conducive to an incipient sadism. Repeated artistic fixations on the impact of violence are said have rendered violent images inauthentic, "bleached" of the potential to inspire horror (Sontag 2003:64). This is said to be the case especially for young viewers who increasingly are inured to the suffering of others. For them, reputedly, violent images have lost their punch. World War II atrocity photos, thus, are said to have completed their vital role of testifying to human cruelty, and now are dismissed as banal, maudlin, even as kitsch. At worst they revivify the gaze of violent perpetrators (Crane 2008), rather than advance the identities of the victims whose personhoods were lost. The 2004 Abu Ghraib photos have been said to rivet our attention not so much for the captured spectacle of human suffering – we see no faces, not in the human pyramid nor in the hooded man – but for their windows into the prison guards' imaginations and the staging of aberrant art (Binder 2010). Giroux notes a similar depravity of aesthetics in the 2010 "kill team photos" from Afghanistan. In Giroux's view, the photos were, among other things, icons of a subculture of sadist cruelty, fed by a commercially fanned death drive (2011).

[10] And typically associated with royal and/or divine terror and sovereignty. See Bahrani (2008), Noegel (2007), and Kitts (2017b).