

they turn to sacrifice. As a symbolic process that can be both “conjunctive” and “disjunctive,” sacrifice is well suited to realize both a “desire for merger with an idealized self-object” and a need for differentiation and separation in the face of personal and social chaos. The violence of sacrificial ritual is an expression of the rage men feel following their failure to identify with this idealized self-object, but also in other contexts, their failure to maintain rigid ego boundaries.

Sacrifice, for Beers, can be traced to a psychological mechanism, one that forms in the earliest phases of male infant development. Like Freud, he offers a psychoanalytical theory of sacrifice, one that posits the motivations for sacrificial behavior in the realm of the unconscious. He illustrates this theory through two different applications. In one, he explains the sacrificial practices described in several Melanesian ethnographies, and argues that these practices rise from “the male need for prestige and their fear of women.” In the second example, Beers demonstrates how his theory of male narcissistic anxiety explains many traditional attitudes toward women in the Episcopal Church, attitudes toward sex, abortion, ordination of women, creationism, and the Eucharist. Here too, unconscious male needs for power and prestige are active.

The following selection is the central theoretical chapter from Beers’ book. It presents what could be called his “narcissism theory” of sacrifice. It briefly summarizes the psychological model and then turns to the task of explaining sacrifice. It is difficult for this selection (as is true for others in this book) to convey the full complexity and subtlety of the theory, but it does present the core structure of Beer’s claims about why men sacrifice.



## From *Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion*

FROM AN anthropological point of view, the cultural context of sacrifice includes the conflicts and contradictions that arise both naturally (logically) or deliberately out of symbolic classificatory systems. These systems are constructed around a sacred order that reflects and protects the inclusive structures

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William Beers, *Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), pp. 137–47. Reprinted with the permission of Wayne State University Press and the author.

of social reality. The historical foundation of social reality is the kinship system. Like most classificatory systems, kinship systems are based on binary oppositions. The kinship surrounding the vast majority of sacrificial systems is patriliney. The binary opposition of the patrilineal kinship system is based on a father/mother, male/female dichotomy.

In qualifying Lévi-Strauss's claim that the mind innately classifies reality through binary oppositions, I have argued that binary or bipolar constructions of reality have their psychological origins in the early narcissistic period of life. MacCormick notes that "the first distinction all new-born humans make is that between self and nurturing other" (1980, 2–3). She goes on to ask, "What is the exact relationship between the organizing work of the unconscious and the conceptual domain of social structure, political relations, and so forth?" (3). Any answer to that question requires a developmental model of the mind.

Through the review of anthropological and dynamic psychological theory in Parts I and II, I developed the thesis that ritual blood sacrifice embodies male and male-identified anxiety and men's symbolic efforts to control and acquire the experienced power of women. In this chapter I want to present a gender-specific psychoanalytic theory of sacrifice using Kohut's model of the mind. One advantage to Kohut's psychology of the self for anthropology is that it diminishes the bothersome nature/nurture argument. The question of whether nature or culture is the basis for this or that human characteristic becomes irrelevant, because without adequate empathic and mirroring self-objects, humans never develop the psychological structure necessary to internalize the social and cultural world. As noted earlier, Mary Douglas wrote that "the only one who holds nothing sacred is the one who has not internalized the norms of any community" (1975, xv). Geertz (1973) says as much when he asserts that without the symbolic systems mediated to the developing psychological apparatus through the parent(s), a human being would remain a formless monster. From a psychoanalytic point of view, this means that parental self-objects begin to provide normative structures for transforming the grandiose self and idealized parent imago into socially realistic ambitions and ideals, mediated by individual talents and skills.

The formation of the bipolar self through the grandiose and idealized self-objects can, even under optimal conditions, become fraught with anxiety, which can be experienced throughout life. The anxiety centers around esteem issues and is marked by intense hunger for the idealized self-object. It is also marked by disintegration anxiety (the fear of fragmentation of the grandiose self). Because the maternal self-object (the idealized parent imago) provides the initial ideals and mirroring for the developing psychological apparatus, subsequent identification and internalization necessary for the continued socialization of an individual is built on this original bipolar structure, and the boundaries of the self continue to be narcissistically related to the internalized social structure.

If, as I have been arguing, gender plays an important part in the self-structuring of male and female psychological apparatuses, men will be more likely to feel threatened by factors affecting their grandiose sense of self-esteem, prestige, and power because they have experienced the omnipotent maternal self-object as Other, rather than experiencing themselves as subjective extensions of the self-object, as will be the case with women. Likewise, they are unable throughout life to ever fully identify with that self-object as woman the way that women can. And, as Philipson (1985) notes, because women have more fluid ego boundaries, they are less likely to feel overly anxious or threatened by marginality—the states of ambiguity that exist amidst all social structures. Indeed, women (and their children) are themselves the primary marginal people in a patrilineal society.

For men, periods of marginality threaten their more rigid ego boundaries. I believe this is true for several related reasons. The male sense of self is based on the maintenance of distinctions. René Girard went so far as to claim that distinctions maintain peace while the loss of distinctions leads to rivalry and violence. This need for distinctions has its origins in the self/self-object period of early narcissism, when the male psychological apparatus is distinguishing from the maternal self-object and structuring the self. Marginality is an intrusion into a social structure that reflects and maintains the structure of the self. A male-determined, patrilineal social structure confronted with marginality (e.g., sacred pollution) is equivalent to an individual man experiencing a narcissistic intrusion of an archaic (maternal) self-object. Indeed, from the point of view of the self-object function, the two are indistinguishable.

I need to say something more about the narcissistic anxiety arising during structural marginality. Anxiety is the psychological place where men and women most differ with regards to marginality. Because of the gender-specific quality of the maternal self-object's emphatic mirroring, when confronted with marginality, women are more likely to identify with the marginality. They have the compensatory structures that allow for merger and equilibrium (a kind of "I am not helpless because I am connected"). Men, on the other hand, will respond to marginality in a different way, via the activation of the grandiose self ("I am not helpless because I am the most powerful"). Geertz clearly shows how the grandiosity works in the Balinese cockfights. Although Kohut uses the term *fear*, marginal anxiety is much more than fear. In truth, anxiety lacks the object that fear has. I prefer the term *dread* to describe the narcissistic experience of marginality. With dread there is both desire and disgust. The ambiguity of distinctions, which marginality offers, creates both the desire for and disgust of merger, as well as the desire for and disgust of the self as separate. The dread of margins is, in fact, desire and disgust on both sides of the ambiguous boundary.

Kierkegaard (1946) was the first modern thinker to articulate the dual side of narcissistic (he termed it *aesthetic*) dread, and his analysis is psycho-

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analytically correct. On the one side, dread has no object. In fact, dread is the destruction of subject and object. And on the other side, dread is the possibility of the self being constituted (in Kohut's terms, through the transmuting internalization of the self-objects). Kierkegaard's discussion of the aesthetic stage and the concept of dread are remarkably parallel to many of Kohut's discussions of narcissistic personality disorders. Marginal anxiety, then, is the place where the self either transforms the self-objects (via identification and internalization) or is fragmented by them.

As I have indicated, on the one hand, women appear more able to identify with and internalize marginal states. *Communitas* is one result of marginal anxiety, and it is perhaps psychologically more available to women. I really do not want to say much more about women; they can write their own psychologies. On the other hand, the psychological apparatus of men experiences sacred pollution or transitional intrusions as threats of self-disintegration. These threats are self-object wounds, and they can lead to rage and to the possibility of aggression and violence. Unlike the idealized mother imago of the narcissistic period, the cultural self-object experience cannot adequately mirror male grandiosity. Consequently, male identification with the now-transformed omnipotent (albeit maternal idealized) self-object remains incomplete. This, I believe, is why men envy and fear women, why they attempt to control and degrade them, and why sacrifice is the male ritual of choice. I am suggesting that male narcissistic self-objects are embodied in the symbols of a culture. I am further suggesting that religious rituals embody and hide these male narcissistic self-objects. And the symbol that ties the male narcissistic need for, resentment of, and envy of the omnipotent maternal self-object (and the women who represent it to men) is the blood sacrifice.

### **The Self-Object and the Symbol of Sacrifice**

Because the marginality desired and feared by men has a strong connection to narcissism, in a self-psychological understanding, sacrifice (the symbolic act that responds to marginality) is comprised of four interrelated narcissistic self-object functions. Through these self-object functions, sacrifice can express: (1) the grandiose desire for merger with an idealized self-object; (2) the dread of such a merger through the act of separation (de-identification, differentiation, expiation, prophylaxis); (3) the narcissistic rage and violence surrounding the disappointment in the merger with and separation from the self-object; and (4) the symbolic transfer and transformation of omnipotence from the idealized maternal self-object to the grandiose male self.

### *Sacrifice as Merger*

According to Lévi-Strauss, Douglas, and Turner, sacrifice functions to bring two symbolic orders or domains into the same symbolic proximity. Even if the merger of the two orders only occurs at the instant of the immolation, two orders are joined. This merger of orders in the marginal space has a narcissistic element. A narcissistic merger, identical to a symbolic merger, is one in which differences become more vague. The distinction between the sacred and the profane, like the distinction between the self and the mirroring or merged self-object, is reduced. Classifications break down. Self and object become more connected by becoming less distinct.

When the self-object function of sacrifice occurs in this way, narcissistic merger is not unlike Turner's concept of *communitas*. *Communitas* is the experience of unstructured, undifferentiated homogeneity. The significant difference between narcissism and *communitas* is that Turner understands *communitas* as the recognition by the participants of equality and human bonds, while the self-objects of narcissism are prestructural, prelinguistic, and thus precognitive. There can be no recognition in a precognitive apparatus. The recognition of *communitas* is a later development, which contains the energy and form of the earlier, now transformed, narcissistic prestructures. *Communitas* has to do with understanding sacrifice; narcissism with explaining it. It would be more correct to say that *communitas* and empathy are equivalent concepts stemming from and containing narcissistic elements expressing the desire to be connected or even merged.

Men sacrifice in order to be connected with their idealized and omnipotent self-objects. The need to merge with the idealized self-object is the most (psychologically) primitive activation of the grandiose self. That activation is, as noted, recognizable in the mirror transference, "in which the child attempts to save the originally all-embracing narcissism by concentrating perfection and power upon the self—here called the grandiose self—and by turning away disdainfully from an outside in which all imperfections have been assigned" (Kohut, 1971, 106). When sacrifice serves to merge the domain of the divine with that of the human (the sacred with the profane, the clean with the polluted), the self-object function is to merge the self with the omnipotent self-object. That is the most archaic form of the sacrifice as merger. Or, if the function is less archaic, the sacrifice attempts to acquire the power of that (maternal) self-object by bringing the two domains into close proximity so that through the victim the power can be transferred from the divine to the human. In this case the men who sacrifice are hoping there is enough similarity (twinship) between the two domains that the transfer is possible.

The least archaic self-object function of the sacrifice as merger is to simply have the omnipotent self-object mirror the power (the need for power) of the men who sacrifice. Under this function would fall the need for power and

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control in the face of suffering, death, or other unavoidable disappointments. A function such as this led Masud Khan to conclude that “it is precisely this need in the human individual for his or her psychic pain to be witnessed silently and unobtrusively by *the other*, that led to the creation of the omnipresence of God in human lives” (1981, 414).

### *Sacrifice as Separation*

Periods of marginality, like the potential for narcissistic merger, increase the likelihood of narcissistic anxiety. Psychoanalytically, the self fears its own dedifferentiating fragmentation, its own destruction (which is also the central anxiety in Jung’s theory of sacrifice). This fear can be expressed as the fear of the loss of power, control, autonomy, and/or meaning. To merge is to lose the self by becoming nothing again in the original narcissistic state. There is a danger in getting too close to the idealized self-object, because of the potential for the breakup of the self.

Anthropologists argue that the binary classification of social reality is an innate and universal activity. Such an assertion helps us to understand and describe the danger of classification (based on patriliney in the case of sacrifice) breakdowns and margin mergers. As I claimed above, the breakdown of classifications of symbolic structures is felt as a real threat because the created structures of idealized identification are intended to guard against narcissistic fragmentation. Here I am simply adding a self-psychological explanation to Durkheim’s theory of the role played by identification, sentiment, and anomie in classificatory systems.

The primal classification, occurring during the narcissistic period of the development of the bipolar self and upon which all subsequent classifications depend (both created and learned), is the classification ultimately threatened by undifferentiated, liminal, and narcissistic merger. I am arguing that anxiety resulting from the breakdown of classifications stems from a prestructural narcissistic stage of development. The cultural relativity of classification systems indicates that the content is not the causative source of anxiety. In other words, anxiety is not simply a learned reaction. The fact that any number of diverse classification breakdowns can give rise to similar states of anxiety suggests that this anxiety is a response to *prestructural* elements, which, through a process of transmuting internalization, creates and fuels the social classificatory structures.

Again, because men have more rigid self boundaries, dedifferentiation or disintegration anxiety leads to a very strong need to differentiate or separate. The sacrifice that serves this self-object function is that of expiation. In this case, the intrusive idealized self-object, which leads to the fragmentation anxiety, is experienced as a dangerous pollution causing the sin, sickness, death, or other change in the classificatory system. The need to maintain

separation leads to a split in the social body, as Douglas claims. The sacrifice then functions as a means of splitting off “not-me” parts from idealized reality and placing them outside of the narcissistically fueled classificatory system.

The anxiety (narcissistic dread) surrounding the marginal period is, as I have noted before, fueled by both desire and disgust. In expiation sacrifice, that which evokes disgust (the threat of fragmentation by the intrusive idealized self-object) is classified as ‘not-me’ and is symbolically embodied in a surrogate or substitute victim, which is killed or scapegoated. Psychologically, the self-object is split into good and bad parts in order to maintain the idealized classifications of reality. Because men presumably classify reality, the split-off parts almost invariably include those experiences having to do with women, sex, and childbirth.

### *Sacrifice as Narcissistic Rage and Violence*

Hubert and Mauss were amazed by the “remarkable fact that, in a general way, sacrifice could serve two such contradictory aims as that of inducing a state of sanctity and that of dispelling a state of sin” (1964, 58). I believe the two self-objects of the bipolar self help explain how such a contradiction (in Turner’s terms, both prophylaxis *and* abandonment) is psychologically possible and how some sacrifices can be either conjunctive or disjunctive or both. Because sacrifice is psychologically an embodiment of self-object functions, the longed-for merger cannot actually take place. Likewise, the separation can never be absolute. Rather, hunger for merger and the desire for rigid ego boundaries reflect the ambivalent tension gradient between the two self-objects. The need to merge is fueled by the longing for the omnipotence of the maternal self-object and for that self-object to mirror the omnipotence of the grandiose self, while the need to remain separate reflects the fear of the intrusive power of the same maternal self-object.

I want to look more closely at the psychology of failed identification/merger and failed idealization/separation. Because male narcissistic identification with the maternal self-object is less likely to receive confirming mirroring from the self-object, the grandiose parts of the self experience the failed identification as a narcissistic injury. Narcissistic injury can lead to narcissistic rage and even aggression. The violence of sacrifice, then, is also a socially transformed expression of the rage resulting from the failed identification with the omnipotence of the idealized self-object. That is part of the answer to the question of the violence of sacrifice. While maternal self-object identification may not receive adequate empathic confirmation, however, later identifications with paternal and other male self-objects are likely to succeed. And what is internalized through male self-objects includes the male self-objects’ own internalized experience of failed identification with maternal self-objects.

The internalization of male self-objects also includes other aspects of male

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identification. Some identifications may reflect psychobiological or cultural vestiges of earlier human evolution. For example, the violent relation between a sacrificial animal and men may have a strong correlation either to the human control over animals that were domesticated and/or to the significance of hunting animals in human evolution. By mentioning this, however, I am not proposing an innate proclivity for male violence. Sacrifice is not simply a cultural way to give men a safe way to kill, although it is that, because of some evolutionary proclivity for violence. I am suggesting that the complex ritual violence performed by men is an ancient way for men to identify with each other as men, and to separate from women. As one anthropologist notes, "In both violent and aggressive action male bonding is the predominant instrument of organization" (Tiger, 1969, 171).

In addition to being a function of violence, male bonding is also a cause of violence. This causal relation results from narcissistic identification within the male bond group and separation from the non-male group (i.e., women children, slaves, captives, and other marginal people, creatures, and self-objects). The split between "me" and "not-me," between group and not-group, reflects the tension between the grandiose self and the threatened fragmentation of the self by the split-off, bad aspects of the idealized self-object (the term *bad* is a judgment that can only rightly be applied after speech is structured; i.e., the original self-objects are pre-structural and therefore neither bad nor good). The group, therefore, is going to perceive outsiders as threats or sources of danger because outsiders affect the narcissistic equilibrium of the group. Outsiders intrude on the boundaries of the group's collective identification (its grandiose self and ideals). Wounds lead to rage and potential violence, as any urban street gang's behavior shows. The sacrificial victim, then is a marginal being on which is focused the 'not-me' (narcissistically split-off) parts, which are then destroyed or violently cut off from the group's culture. This psychological process is identical to Bakan's "idea of sacrifice in which that which is 'me' is made into something 'not-me,' and in which that 'not-me' is sacrificed in order that 'I' might continue to live" (1968, 79). In the violent response to an intruder, the narcissistic identification with that intruder is apparent because the violence reflects, in Kohut's terms, "the active (almost anticipatory) inflicting on others of those narcissistic injuries which he is most afraid of suffering himself" (1978, 2:638).

### *Sacrifice as the Transfer of Omnipotence from the Maternal to the Male*

When men bond, they gain self-validation and self-affirmation through a shared, idealized male self-object. The bonding to older men by boys and younger men gives all (young and old) self-respect, confidence, and skills they desire, but it also further separates the men from their maternal self-objects.



This is clearly the case in many secret male societies in which initiation rites often imitate the role of women in childbirth. One social scientist has suggested that these ceremonies “appear to express an envy of the female role. For example, the initiation is often culturally perceived as a rebirth ritual in which men take a child and bring about his birth as a man by magical techniques stolen long ago from women” (D’Andrade, 1958, 196). The role of gender envy has also been discussed by Bruno Bettelheim (1955). Envy indicates that while male bonding attempts to separate the men from the women, the separation conceals a male desire for identification with and acquisition of the power of the maternal self-object. Initiation rites indicate this ambivalence and narcissistic ambiguity. D’Andrade continues: “The need for the initiate to prove his manhood by bearing extreme fatigue and pain [as though in birthing labor and childbirth] appears to indicate some uncertainty in sex identity” (196).

Sacrifice, as Jay (1985) argues, takes away the power and value of descent from the mother and ritually gives it to the father. Male dimorphic dominance, bonding, and the exclusion of women from the center of power are confirmed by sacrifice. The “magical techniques” of women were “stolen” because they were experienced by men as powerful, as dangerous, as intrusive. Men envy the perceived power of women and create ritual actions of blood and rebirth in order to have equivalent power and control over life and death. But Jay’s position lacks a male psychology to explain the male perception of women’s power. This psychological aspect of sacrifice reflects its twinship self-object function. The transfer of “magical techniques” is the acquisition of skills and talents based on identification and likeness.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted an explanation that does not contradict an anthropological understanding of sacrifice or the self-psychological explanation of narcissism and the male self. I have also fleshed out the psychological part of a theory in which men sacrifice in order to move closer to, gain distance from, or acquire the experience of power and perfection. The ritual reenacts the terror of merger and separation, which men experience as the tension gradient between the grandiose self and the idealized maternal self-object during the early period of narcissism. The idealized reenactment gives men power (from their point of view, the power is made available to them or they receive the effects of it), which was originally located in the experience of the maternal self-object. The cultural function and result of this transfer of power is that women are excluded from exercising cultural power (unless kinship lineage allows one to rule as queen, etc., while the rest are ruled by men—fathers, husbands, and in matrilineal societies, brothers and sons). The need to

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sacrifice occurs when the male narcissistically invested social structures have their boundaries tested or threatened, that is, whenever self-objects intrude. The psychology of narcissism developed by Heinz Kohut has helped me take several different interpretations and explanations of sacrifice and place them within a context that clarifies, relates, and supports them.

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