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BLM: POLICE KILLING AS RITUAL HUMAN SACRIFICE

By

O A LADIMEJI

Institute for African and Diaspora Studies

University of Lagos

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Part 1: The US

In some earlier writings, I explored the possibility that US police killings, much like lynchings, were a form of ritual human sacrifice, unaware that several important scholars had arrived at the same conclusion.

Brian Smith, formerly Professor of Religious Studies at UC Riverside, writes:

“...modern executions are more or less undeniably ritualised killings of a human being and so, of course, are those traditional religious practices termed ‘human sacrifices’.”¹

Police killings in the US seem at first sight random and arbitrary, but if one stands back, there is a clear pattern. At a sociological level, there is no requirement that a social practice - the organised and recurrent execution of Black males - have only one ‘driver’. Successful resistance to change would be better explained if there were multiple drivers and institutional interests at stake, not just one.

Ritualised killing becomes a means whereby through police action on its behalf, society attains a divine status of holiness through purgation. Situations that threaten the existing social order, a sense that the existing order may break down, are seen as symptoms of divine displeasure, which must be propitiated through further and numerous sacrifices. After WW1 returning Black American soldiers were seen as a potential threat to the status quo of the South USA, and a vigorous and renewed outbreak of lynching took place.

‘In Congress, the fear that returning soldiers posed a threat to racial hierarchy in the South was a matter of public record. On August 16, 1917, Mississippi Senator James K. Vardaman spoke on the floor of the United States Senate, warning that the reintroduction of black servicemen to the South would “inevitably lead to disaster.” For Senator Vardaman and others like him, black soldiers’ patriotism was a threat, not a virtue. “Impress the negro with the fact that he is defending the flag, inflate his untutored soul with military airs, teach him that it is his duty to keep the emblem of the Nation flying triumphantly in the air,” and, the senator cautioned, “it is but a short step to the conclusion that his political rights must be respected.”²

¹ (Smith, 2000, p. 4)

² (Stevenson, 2017, p. 25)

The crisis of 2008, and more recently, the Pandemic are further signs of the need for extensive propitiation. Propitiation would be a better explanation of the continued random police killing in the same locales, even during the trial of Derek Chauvin, which would otherwise seem irrational.

Ritualised police killing: the traffic stop, followed by the police arriving guns drawn to effect an execution could be seen as arbitrary behaviour (one bad apple etc) if it were not repeated ad nauseam. Repetition turns it into a ritual.

As Smith writes:

‘The participants of the sacrifice, having entered into a separate and sacred ritual sphere and having themselves been transformed and identified with the gods, are required to act accordingly - to act like the gods do and to leave behind the ways of human beings.’³

As the police enter into this ritual, all human empathy disappears as they take on the role of ‘gods’.

Smith also explains the extraordinary overdetermination of the ritualised killing of unarmed persons i.e. multiple armed police shooting at one unarmed person or multiple shots at the same unarmed person at close range.

‘In sacrifice, and also in modern executions, we have the attempt to enact under controlled circumstances the ‘perfect kill’.’⁴

Sacrifices are historically, sometimes public and sometimes private. In the US they have been mostly public, but in the UK they have recently been behind closed doors - in police custody.

‘Executions in pre-modern Europe were public displays whereby a drama unfolded before the eyes of large crowds. They were meant to portray the power of the state and church over the bodies of the disobedient, and the spectacle of suffering (the more the better) was designed not only to punish but to convey a pedagogical message of power, punishment, and the possibility of redemption to the assemblage.’⁵

One can challenge Smith’s referral to pre-modern Europe, as in any way different from our present circumstances. Fire-bombing Tokyo, an undefended city made of wooden buildings of no military significance, and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima, an equally undefended city of no military significance can be seen as forms of mass human sacrifice. The intended effect was no different than that desired by the Aztecs.

It was understood quite early that murder was not a useful military deterrent. Assuming that US soldiers intended to murder them, Japanese soldiers fought to the last man even if in indefensible situations. It was only after major efforts by US Command to communicate

³ (Smith, 2000, p. 6)

⁴ (Smith, 2000, p. 6)

⁵ (Smith, 2000, p. 6)

that surrendering Japanese soldiers would not be murdered that Japanese soldiers began to regularly surrender when in a hopeless situation, thus speeding up US military progress. As Ferguson shows, there was little connection between the number of military casualties and the outcome of a war, and none at all with the number of civilian casualties.

‘It was a common misconception of the age of totalwar that victory went to the side that killed the most of the enemy in battle. As Elias Canetti put it: ‘Each side wants to constitute the larger crowd of living fighters and it wants the opposing side to constitute the largest heap of the dead.’ But if killing the enemy had been the key to victory, the Central Powers would have won the First World War and the Axis Powers the Second.’⁶

Christianity had established a taboo against human sacrifice, so the actors needed to persuade themselves and their publics that they were doing something different while at the same time satisfying a primordial Western need.

‘ Only when the Allied authorities adopted techniques of psychological warfare designed to encourage rather than discourage surrender did German and Japanese resistance end.’⁷

If it was known well before the end of WW2 by concrete examples that the fear of murder prevented surrender, then it was simply not possible for those in command to think that the firebombing of Tokyo or the nuking of Hiroshima would encourage surrender as publicly claimed.

Smith writes:

‘Human sacrifices among the Aztecs, like the public executions in premodern Europe, were ritualised killings designed (at least in part) to keep those who witnessed them in order.’⁸

Smith at one point concludes:

‘The similarities between sacrifice and murder are close; indeed, only an interpretative function can distinguish the two.’⁹ .. ‘ what is a ‘sacrifice’ for some may be something quite different for others.’¹⁰

Police killing Black males in the US follow a continuum with earlier lynchings where the ritualised nature is openly evident. Lynching can be seen as a ritualised practice involving whole families in a festival atmosphere, with the victim’s intimate parts often presented to the local Governor for symbolic consumption. Scholars at the time have described lynchings in terms of:

‘The mob “turned the act into a symbolic rite in which the black victim became the representative of his race..’

It has been reported as ‘a joyous moment’.

⁶ (Ferguson, 2004, p. 150)

⁷ (Ferguson, 2004, p. 148) Ferguson is caught up in the trope of ‘rational behaviour’ so seeks either rational or overwhelming emotional commitment to explain conduct. This simply does not account for the majority of the facts.

⁸ (Smith, 2000, p. 7)

⁹ (Smith, 2000, p. 18)

¹⁰ (Smith, 2000, p. 19)

“Whole families came together, mothers and fathers, bringing even their youngest children. It was the show of the countryside– a very popular show,” read a 1930 editorial in the Raleigh News and Observer. “Men joked loudly at the sight of the bleeding body ... girls giggled as the flies fed on the blood that dripped from the Negro’s nose.”

‘In the 1931 Maryville, Missouri, lynching of Raymond Gunn, the crowd estimated at 2,000 to 4,000 was at least a quarter women, and included hundreds of children. One woman “held her little girl up so she could get a better view of the naked Negro blazing on the roof”⁴¹

What at first appears to be merely a mark of difference is in fact a matter of utmost importance. In the earlier lynchings, there was public participation, an essential part of many important religious rituals, whereas by themselves police executions are only reported after the event leaving the white audience to merely imagine the events. However, the availability of popular videos meant that the ritual could be enjoyed either in real-time or at least vicariously by replay. This is why Chauvin, knowing that he was being videoed, far from stopping, felt encouraged to continue to the end - ‘the perfect kill’, and broadcast it to the whole country. This event was a perfect public snuff movie, courtesy of the local police department. Chauvin was not at all ashamed or regretful of his performance. He had entered a trance-like state where he was acting out and on divine instructions.¹² Similar response to Chauvin was made by those responsible for the beating of Rodney King years earlier.¹³

Sartre had noted this cycle of violence and uprising in the colonial context, and the US informal segregation has all the appearance of a neo-colonial context. Sartre in his preface to Fanon’s work, wrote:

‘These constantly renewed aggressions, far from bringing them to submission thrust them into an unbearable contradiction which the European will pay for sooner or later. After that, when it is their (the natives..) turn to be broken in, when they are taught what shame and hunger and pain are, all that is stirred up in them is a volcanic fury whose force is equal to that of the pressure put upon them.’¹⁴

Terrified of the possibility of a violent uprising, the settlers, in this case the ‘white’ power structure, reach for the National Guard, for overwhelming force. US streets become patrolled by armoured vehicles, snatch squads arrive and men openly carrying semi and fully automatic weapons and a desire to use them stroll the streets. Legislators pass laws to support cold-blooded murder, immunity from prosecution for driving into crowds of peaceful protestors (thus overturning the universal basic rule that preservation of life

¹¹ (Lartey & Morris, 2018)

¹² Those wanting an exclusively secular interpretation will have some difficulty explaining why Chauvin did not desist once he knew he was being recorded.

¹³ (Levin, 2021)

¹⁴ (Preface Fanon, 1967, p. 17)

overrides any traffic rules). A US President encourages vigilantes. We have been here before and not just in colonial times.

There is a dialectic to this violence:

‘The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms and broken up without reserve the systems of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life, that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters.’¹⁵

This very aggressive repression fuels the fury for rebellion. While in the short term, as Fanon noted, this fury will be turned inwards and explode with internalised violence within the ‘native’ areas, thus allowing the dominant group to emphasise and declare the need for repression as a response to rampant crime in the ‘native’ areas:

‘While the settler or the policeman has the right the livelong day to strike the native, to insult him and to make him crawl to them, you will see the native reaching for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him by another native; for the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-a-vis his brother.’¹⁶

Instinctively, the settler class seeks a massacre, a bonfire of bodies, perhaps even a travelling circus of bonfires (from coast to coast, as they say) to show who is boss and to satisfy or assuage the anger of the gods. Such a thirst for sacrifice could change everything, and take us into uncharted waters. Who knows the future, but let us pray this does not happen. For the US, reliance on its overwhelming might has proven disastrous in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya. At present the world is full of people who know how to disable US army vehicles and inflict serious injury on US forces, and if they themselves were under attack, would be willing to share their knowledge and expertise with any oppressed group in the US, as did Gaddafi with the Irish.

Without doubt, the US armed forces, with the enthusiastic support of vigilantes and civilian militia such as the ‘Proud Boys’, could turn large parts of the US into a wasteland and declare victory. Let us hope it does not come to that. However the choice of escalation lies with the US state and not with either the African American or Latin or Native American population.

Part 2: Britain

In the UK, deaths at the hands of the police generally take place behind the scenes ‘in custody’, though there have been some recent instances of public executions. Ian Loader, Professor of Criminology at Oxford University, came to see police killing as ‘sacrifice’ from examining the official process of review of the deaths in police custody. He noted a

¹⁵ (Fanon, 1967, p. 38)

¹⁶ (Fanon, 1967, p. 54)

repetitive institutional process (ritual) and asked: 'Why this repeated cycle of death, review and inaction, and the attendant sense of enduring crisis and institutional intractability?'¹⁷

Loader recognises that "the police retain traces of untouchable authority" and then quotes another scholar: 'The police are linked, even in modern societies, with the sacred, the powerful, mysterious, distant and awesome'.¹⁸ This approach shares Smith's view that the police are vested with sacred powers on behalf of the dominant elements of society. Loader takes this as a clue to what might be going on. Conventionally, the police are seen as a rule-governed bureaucracy but the reality is different. When unlawful killing emerges, there is a great deal of angst and misunderstanding. If the angst was about the unlawful killing why should there be no action taken to prevent further acts? Loader quotes a report by the charity, Mind 'More than 15 years since Rocky Bennett's death, we are still no closer to implementing the lessons learned.'¹⁹

Loader suggests that the angst arises in the conflict between the desire to present the police as rule-governed defenders of civic virtue and the apparent evidence of something else going on. The ritual becomes a means for re-establishing the norm: there are rules and if broken we will investigate. This apparent consensus is however entirely false.

'This suggests that the consensus on how to respond to deaths in custody is a surface phenomenon that masks a deeper conflict and that the recurrent failure to enact sensible remedies is the product of something more embedded than lack of resources and institutional inertia.'²⁰

As Loader says:

'The recurring mix of review, reform proposal and institutional intractability intimates, however, that something else is 'going on' - namely, a ritual of catharsis and reassurance that conveys the appearance of busy concern while the fundamentals of the status that conduce to custodial death are left in place.'²¹

For Loader, there are two roles policing plays. Firstly, there is the symbolic role of the police in restoring and enforcing order according to the law in society, and it is this role that creates angst when evidence of failure arises. The second role is that of the sacred interlocutor with other mysterious forces that through sacrifice bring about the restoration of the status quo.

'The deeper conflict is between the state's duty to ensure the welfare of those whom it detains and the effectively powerful idea that policing must be afforded the tools and support needed to manage marginal populations to secure public protection and maintain order.'²²

Loader euphemistically referred to a world of 'fantasy' in which these acts are required. But the key issue is this: to what extent in any material sense, as Sartre asked, is the killing of

¹⁷ (Loader, 2019, p. 3)

¹⁸ (Loader, 2019, p. 5)

¹⁹ (Loader, 2019, p. 7)

²⁰ (Loader, 2019, p. 7)

²¹ (Loader, 2019, p. 8)

²² (Loader, 2019, p. 7)

innocent unarmed people likely to increase subordination rather than provoke rebellion? To be effective to enforce subordination, the killing should be demonstrably of those who resist or rebel rather than a random selection. However, if the purpose of the ritual is to seek purgation and catharsis, to remind the dominant society that it has the power to control and that they need not fear the marginalised, then the public visibility and repetition become explicable. Chauvin showed no hesitation even when he knew he was being filmed and, we have suggested, rather felt empowered to ‘finish the job’.

It is this understanding that the randomised killing of marginal people is so pointless as a control mechanism that leads Loader to believe that ‘something else is going on’. One can return to the killing of veterans after WW1. These are people who have been trained not to fear death, so why should anyone think lynching would have the desired effect unless the desired effect is in the minds of the lynch-mobbers themselves? Such behaviour is otherwise rationally incoherent. Loader locates this something else in a world of ‘fantasy’, while Smith locates it in a divine world requiring propitiation. Whether there is any substantive disagreement between Smith and Loader remains to be seen. Professionally, Loader as a criminologist may be less at ease with religious terminology than Brian Smith, a professor of religious studies. But even Loader goes as far as to speak of a ‘quasi-religious’ context.

‘I have argued in this article that in official reactions to deaths in police custody, one can discern a deep structure of meaning that helps to make sense of the otherwise puzzling motifs that recur in such reactions. What that structure discloses is an illiberal and undemocratic policing imaginary which in effect treats those who die in custody as collateral damage; bodies that are sacrificed to shore up and defend a police system that protects the law-abiding majority from dangerous out-groups. One outcome of this powerful imaginary is that those who die in custody and their families are expelled from consideration both as fully democratic citizens and as victims of abuse or neglect.’²³

What can one learn from all this? If what is driving the killing of Black and minority males in the US is such a deep-seated Western need for human sacrifice²⁴, an exclusive focus on improving procedures is unlikely to succeed. These attempts at procedural reform are likely to meet the same end as all past efforts: ‘these efforts typically fall into a quagmire of warm words and repeated inaction’.²⁵ Further, since the ritual is performed to ensure that the audience reaps the sense of serenity and security, then as that audience, the fearful dominant society, is directly complicit, as these acts, as these sacrifices, are being performed

²³ (Loader, 2019, p. 14)

²⁴ This pattern of human sacrifice is rooted in European culture (*Human Sacrifices?*, 2021) (Fadlan, 2012). While explicitly evidenced before the introduction of Christianity, it is here argued that much of pre-Christian Western culture absorbed itself into Western Christianity. To that extent it would appear that Western Christianity is a surface phenomenon concealing the continuation of ancient European practices which became remodelled and renamed. Papal Bulls (*The Papacy, 1452*) (*The Papacy, 1493*), allowing Europeans to treat other human beings in ways forbidden to treat animals, cannot be rooted in Biblical Christianity and so must be sourced in older European traditions. If one reviews pictures of US lynchings one can see ecstatic rapture in the eyes of the white women spectators.

²⁵ (Loader, 2019, p. 15)

for them, so they, not solely the police, should be held accountable. Police killing, this ritual slaughter, is both a political and religious phenomenon. There is blood on many hands.

CONCLUSION

A human sacrifice does not become a sacrifice just because it is called a 'sacrifice', just as it does not cease to be a 'sacrifice' because it is called something else. There are two competing explanatory frameworks: a) purely secular or b) mixture of secular and religious. Purely secular explanations are unable to account for threatening to kill or killing veterans after WW1. A serving army officer is dedicated to protecting the country that is mostly white with his life, and so arbitrarily killing or threatening to kill such a person²⁶ cannot possibly increase the security of the white majority. Then again the US Army's breach of its own values of loyalty - speaks volumes.²⁷

²⁶ (Hutton, 2021) (Post, 2021)

²⁷ **The dog that did not bark:** neither in post WW1 scenario with Veterans nor today in the case of Caron Nazario, a serving army officer, did the US Army intervene to protect its own. The treatment of Caro Nazario was not merely disrespect to the institution but an insult to 'the uniform'. But the silence of the US Army was a fundamental breach of its oath of loyalty. US Army lists 'Loyalty' as its number 1 core value:

'Bear true faith and allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, the Army, your unit and other Soldiers'

And then adds: 'By wearing the uniform of the U.S. Army you are expressing your loyalty. And by doing your share, you show your loyalty to your unit.' (US Army, 2021). In the case of Caron Nazario and the veterans of WW1 the silence of the US Army speaks volumes. If an employee of JP Morgan or Microsoft or Exxon was similarly attacked on duty their employer would take vigorous action in their support and be seen to be doing so. Caron Nazario was apparently left to his own devices even though he was in uniform when attacked. Caron Nazario was required to be loyal to 'other soldiers', but apparently this loyalty was not required to be reciprocated.

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