Ritual human sacrifice promoted and sustained the evolution of stratified societies

Frequently Asked Questions and Additional Materials


Figure 1. Execution of a human victim. Drawn by Jacues Arago, 1819. Colourised by Joseph Watts.

**Figure Reference:** Arago, Jacques. (1822). *Promenade autour du monde, : pendant les années 1817, 1818, 1819 et 1820, sur les corvettes du roi l’Uranie et la Physicienne, commandées par M. Freycinet*. NZ Glass Case 910.41 A69, Special Collections, University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services.

For more on human sacrifice in ancient Hawaii see the Additional Materials section below.
Q. What exactly is human sacrifice?

A. Human sacrifice is the religiously motivated, ritualised killing of a human being.

Q. How does human sacrifice help build and maintain social inequality?

A. In traditional Austronesian cultures there was a great deal of overlap between religious and secular authority. Those who were out of favour with social elites often became the victims of human sacrifice. Human sacrifice may have been a particularly effective means of social control because it provided a supernatural justification for punishment, its graphic and painful nature served as a deterrent to others, and because it demonstrated the ultimate power of elites.

Human sacrifice is scarce in modern societies, but was practiced in early societies throughout the world. Our study suggests that human sacrifice functioned as a stepping-stone to help build and maintain power in early hierarchical societies. Once these social systems developed, the practice was replaced by more formal methods of social control.

Q. Who are the Austronesians?

A. The term ‘Austronesian’ refers to a large family of languages that originated in Taiwan, and are now found across a vast area encompassing over half the world’s longitude and a third of its latitude. Austronesian-speaking cultures have been described as providing a natural laboratory for testing theories about early human societies because of the varied physical environments they inhabit, and the diverse range of social and religious systems they have evolved. The cultures used in this study are part of the Pulotu database, which is freely available to the public at www.pulotu.com.

Q. Do these findings apply more generally than Austronesian cultures?

A. The Social Control Hypothesis arose from descriptions of human sacrifice in early American cultures (see Additional Materials below). Our study shows that human sacrifice also functioned as a means of social control in traditional Austronesian cultures. While there is substantial variation in the methods and motivations for human sacrifice across cultures, there is often a link between human sacrifice and social hierarchy. For example, the archaeological records of early Chinese and Egyptian cultures show that the graves of rulers were often accompanied by pits containing hundreds of human bodies. In ancient Aztec culture human sacrifice social elite orchestrated human sacrifices to terrorise populations and justify their authority. This suggests that our findings may apply across a wide range of early human societies.

Q. What is the importance of social stratification?

A. Social stratification refers to the division of a society into groups of unequal wealth and status (social classes), membership in which is hereditary. Before around 12,000 years ago humans lived in largely egalitarian groups of hunter-gatherers. Social stratification was one
of the first stable social hierarchies to develop in human history and gave rise to formal political systems such as chiefdoms, kingdoms, and the complex polities we live in today.

Q. Why did you use phylogenetic methods, rather than just standard correlational methods?

A. Standard correlational methods assume that cultures are statistically independent from one another, and cannot get at the direction of causality. However, cultures are not independent – they are linked by common descent and historical relationships. Phylogenetic methods account for this non-independence by modelling the evolution of traits on phylogenetic trees. This modelling enabled us to infer the direction of causality based on whether human sacrifice arose before or after social stratification. We found that human sacrifice helped to build strict class-based social systems, and to maintain social inequality in general.

Q. Other than social control, were there other reasons for human sacrifice in Austronesia?

A. Victims of human sacrifice were sometimes captives from neighbouring cultures or communities. In these cases human sacrifice wasn’t necessarily used as a punishment, but still functioned to display the ultimate power of social elites.

Q. Wasn’t it usually those of high status in a society that became the victims of human sacrifice?

A. This popular misconception may have come from the references to human sacrifice in the Bible, such as when Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son Isaac. While those of high social status, including their children, were sometimes the victims of human sacrifice this was uncommon in Austronesian cultures. Instead, it was usually low-status individuals such as slaves that became the victims of human sacrifice, and high-status individuals such as chiefs or priests who were the instigators.

Q. In those cultures that practiced human sacrifice, how common was it?

A. There was variation between cultures in how often human sacrifices were performed. In some cultures human sacrifice was only called for on infrequent occasions, such as the death of a chief. However, in cultures such as Hawaii there were a wide range of events that called for human sacrifice, including annual fishing and horticulture rites, the felling of a tree for the carving of a god, the consecration of a temple, and the violation of important social rules.

Q. Are there countries that still practice human sacrifice today?

A. Human sacrifice is sometimes claimed to still be practiced in remote regions of Africa and South America, though these claims are hard to substantiate.

Q. Were victims usually eaten?

A. In this study we did not investigate cannibalism. While ritualised cannibalism is known to have occurred in conjunction with human sacrifice in some societies, human sacrifice need not necessarily involve cannibalism.
Q. Is the death penalty in the U.S.A. an example of human sacrifice?

A. By definition, human sacrifice is religiously motivated, which the death penalty in the U.S.A. is not. The parallel here is that the death penalty and human sacrifice may both function to demonstrate the power of rulers and to deter rebellion.

Q. What other regions of the world were human sacrifices performed?

A. Human sacrifice is known to have occurred in early Germanic, Arab, Turkic, Inuit, Austronesian, African, Chinese, Japanese as well as South, Central and North American cultures.

Q. What does this study tell us about religion in general?

A. Religion is popularly claimed to provide moral foundations to society. Yet throughout human history religion has been used by social elites to establish and maintain social control - human sacrifice provides a grisly illustration of just how far this can go.

Additional Materials:


“We think some of these immigrants might have been warrior-cultists dedicated to gods of the Tezcatlipoca-Xipe Totec complex, with human sacrifice and cannibalism. We propose that in the Chaco area, some such groups of Mexicans was able to use these practices for social control, terrorizing the local populace into submission and developing the hierarchical social system we see reflected in the regions architecture.” p.463.


“Curiously, at some of these ceremonies of massive human sacrifice, the kings and lords from allied and enemy city-states were invited to the ceremonial centre to witness the spectacular festival, as is seen in chapter 5. The ritual extravaganza was carried out with maximum theatrical tension, paraphernalia, and terror in order to amaze and intimidate the visiting dignitaries who returned to their kingdoms trembling with fear and convinced that cooperation and no rebellion was the best response to Aztec imperialism.” pp.75-76.

“Under very serious circumstances, probably in times of emergency or on the occasion of an important ceremony, Makemake asked for human sacrifices. The victims were children kidnapped by the priests, prisoners, or persons who had incurred the displeasure of the king.” p. 329.


“we are led to consider human sacrifice not as a separate category but rather as the ultimate form that every sacrifice may take” p. 49

“the gods are hierarchized, so that by performing a sacrifice – this is, by instantiating a given god – one puts oneself in a given hierarchical category. Of course the choice of the gods to instantiate is not free: one can only sacrifice to the gods that correspond to one’s hierarchical position in society. Thus sacrifice ensures that the hierarchy of the gods is translated into a social hierarchy and reproduces it.” p. 109

“Having the role of supreme sacrifice, the king must consecrate the supreme sacrifice, human sacrifice. It is this privilege/duty, rather than a special title, that sets him apart from the rest of nobility” p. 141

“The transgressor of royal taboos or of taboos on which all of society is based does not recognise them because he does not respect them (in matters little whether this is intentional); consequently he does not recognise the hierarchical difference between himself and the king (as a representative of the society) and thus the latter’s legitimacy. From this standpoint he is in a position similar to that of the enemy. By abolishing the foundation of the hierarchy, he endangers the entire social order as it has been constituted by the king....The transgressor must be put to death, then, in person or through a substitute. But this execution must take a form that permits the reaffirmation of the existing relationship between the social hierarchy and the gods that are its principle foundation. As a result, the transgressor will be consecrated to the gods, and his sacrifice will at once reconstitute these gods and the social hierarchy that rests upon them.” pp. 164-165