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The optimal sacrifice:

A study of voluntary death among the Siberian Chukchi

ABSTRACT
In the Siberian North, "voluntary death," that is, a person, who—often because of illness and old age—requests to die at the hands of close relatives, has traditionally been explained as a form of suicide resulting from the region's harsh living conditions. In this article, I suggest an alternative interpretation. Drawing on ethnographic data collected among the Chukchi of northern Kamchatka, I argue that voluntary death is effectively a ritual blood sacrifice. In making this argument, I recast long-standing debates about sacrifice by suggesting that behind the triangular relationship of sacrificer, deity, and victim lies a structure of ideal sacrifice, which is the impossible act of self-sacrifice. This structure, in turn, makes it possible to conceive of voluntary death as categorically different from suicide—indeed, as a ritual inversion of suicide. [*Chukchi, Siberia, voluntary death, sacrifice, suicide, religion, personhood*]

Voluntary death is the term generally used to describe a specific cultural practice that is well known from the early ethnographies of northeastern Siberia. It involves the killing of a family member—often ill and aged—who expresses a wish to die. An observation made among the Itelmen by the 18th-century explorer of Kamchatka, G. W. Steller serves to frame the following discussion:

> They are disposed towards suicide to such a degree that they commit it for no other reason than for simply being old and feeble and no longer useful in the world. In the year 1737, an old father admonished his son to hang him from the balagan [dwelling] because he was no longer useful. The son did; but because the strap broke on the first attempt the father fell down and scolded his son for being clumsy. To correct his mistake and give better proof of his obedience and cleverness, the son hanged the father a second time with a double strap. It seems that the hope of getting to the lower, better world sooner has very much stimulated the Itelmen to suicide. [2003:221–222]

Acts of voluntary death, such as this one, have been recorded among various indigenous peoples in the Russian Far East, not only the Itelmen but also the Koryak (Jochelson 1908:759; Kennan 2007:214–215) and, especially, the Chukchi (Batianova 2000:155–156; Bogoras 1904–09:561–562; Sarychev 1802:109; Wrangell 1842:121–122). Several circumpolar peoples—such as the Inuit (Boas 1964:615; Rasmussen 1931:144), the Caribou Indians (Coon 1974:329–330), and the Sámi (Bukharov 1883:284–285)—are reported to have hastened the death of those who were debilitated by old age and illness by deserting them in the wilderness with little or no food or by encouraging them to take their own lives. What makes the cases of voluntary death somewhat different from these reports is that people deliberately ask—or even demand—to be killed by close relatives, who feel morally obliged to fulfill their request. Moreover, an important characteristic of most other indigenous suicide patterns is that they are relatively nonritualized—that is, they tend to be individually performed events, rarely supported by definite rules and proscriptions (Leighton and Hughes

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1955). By contrast, acts of voluntary death are usually accompanied by a set of fairly elaborate ritual arrangements.

Does this then mean that voluntary death is different from suicide and that it would be wrong to put the two on the same footing? For one may ask, is voluntary death simply an archaic type of active euthanasia in which an old and sick person decides that life is no longer worth living and is therefore helped to die? Indeed, this has been the favored view of many anthropologists writing on Siberia and the circumpolar North more generally. Those who hold this view generally see voluntary death as almost self-explanatory, as the direct and natural outcome of living in the harsh conditions in the Arctic, which simply make infirmity and old age too burdensome to the local community (see, e.g., Kennan 2007:214; Weyer 1932:138; Zelenin 1937). However, it is quite clear that such an environmental-determinist rationale is insufficient as an explanation, in part because the practice of voluntary death has continued, at least among certain groups of Chukchi, long after their incorporation into the Soviet state economy, with all its medical and technical support and its centralized delivery of consumer goods. Moreover, if what is at stake in voluntary death is simply an old and sick person giving up his or her life because of feelings of uselessness, then that person could presumably put an end to his or her own existence instead of asking others to do the killing—and in a ritualistic fashion, at that. Finally, according to the ethnographic records, it was not only the old, diseased, and helpless who desired to be killed. It was also able-bodied men and women in their prime, who felt unable to fight against deep sorrow at the death of some near relative or who were upset because of a quarrel at home. Waldemar Bogoras (1904–09:561–562), in his classical monograph on the Chukchi, describes various instances of voluntary death due to each of these causes. If the tradition of voluntary death is just a matter of environmental adaptation, then it makes little sense that relatively young, healthy people would ask to be killed.

If explanations for voluntary death cannot be reduced to simple environmental and technological conditions, then what is the explanation? My overall argument is that voluntary death is a ritual blood sacrifice, but of a particular kind: It is a means of exchanging soul-stuff with deceased ancestors in accordance with how such exchange ought to be done, which stands in conscious contrast to how it is usually done: through the killing of a domestic animal or other surrogate for the "real thing."[1] As such, voluntary death represents, I argue, nothing less than the optimal—and therefore rarely realized—sacrifice.

The Chukchi conceive of voluntary death with a good deal of ambivalence. It is understood as an essentially praiseworthy death, which is supposed to please the deceased ancestors, who experience it as the physical return of a long dead relative. However, the killing of a family member is also recognized as the most terrifying sacrifice to carry out. For this reason, acts of voluntary death are uncommon during times of stasis but can occur more frequently in times of social crisis. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Chukchi, living in the remote corner of northern Kamchatka, have largely been forced to return to a subsistence lifestyle (King 2002:138; Plattet 2005). Virtually no wages have been paid to them since 1997, yet prices on essential goods have risen several hundred percent. Consequently, the great majority of local Chukchi are now totally dependent on their herds of reindeer for their survival, and apart from bread, tea, and tobacco, no imported food products are consumed on a daily basis.[2] What is more, the Siberian permafrost, spanning a million square kilometers, has started to melt for the first time since it formed during the last glacial period, more than 18,000 years ago. As a result, large parts of the tundra have turned into lakes and swamps, destroying the food resources and migration routes of the domesticated reindeer. The reindeer herds of northern Kamchatka numbered in the thousands in the late Soviet period, but today only a few hundred are left (King 2002:159). In the face of these disasters and an increasingly unpredictable natural environment, the Chukchi appear to have intensified their ritual blood sacrifices to the deceased ancestors, who they believe to be the "true" owners of both human and animal life. This activity may involve the ritual killing of elderly family members, who ask to be executed as sacrificial offerings to the dead.

There is, however, more to my argument then simply focusing on the so-called exotic within Chukchi culture—that is, those behaviors that, in the words of Francis Hutcheson, "excite horror and make men stare" (Smith 1982:xii). For only by coming to grips with the socioreligious mechanisms behind voluntary death can one get a better understanding of the complex patterns of common features and differences between this type of killing and indigenous suicide, which involves mainly young people, who hang themselves in tragically great numbers (Pika 1993). These two types of deaths—voluntary and suicide—have often been conflated in the ethnographic literature (see Batianova 2000:158; Bogoras 1904–09:561–562; Leighton and Hughes 1955), but I show here why this assessment is not entirely correct.

Problems with the study of voluntary death

In constructing my argument, I draw on ethnographic information that I collected among a small group of Chukchi reindeer herders in the village of Achaiyayam in northern Kamchatka during an extended period of fieldwork.[3] A remarkable feature of this group is that its members never converted to Christianity, and permanent socioeconomic relations with Russia were established relatively late, in the 1930s and 1940s (Plattet 2005:135). This, I believe, is one important reason why—although they acknowledge the

horrors of voluntary death—they do not condemn it as a mortal sin, as does the Russian Orthodox Church, for which the killing of a relative is equated with either suicide or murder and deserves punishment, if not in this life, then in the afterlife. From my own observations, hostility toward the killing of elderly relatives is quite pronounced among the Evens, a Siberian indigenous group of hunters and reindeer herders, who were baptized by the Orthodox Mission in the 1700s and who, since the establishment of the village of Achaiyayam in the 1930s, have lived alongside its predominantly Chukchi population. Thus, many of the Evens that I spoke to claimed voluntary death to be a one-way ticket to hell. As one Even woman assured me, "Down there the violence that the soul has inflicted on itself will be repeated in all eternity." By contrast, among the Chukchi population, I found no evidence of the belief that self-destruction in this world necessarily led to punishment in the next. In fact, to the Chukchi, voluntary death—understood as the wish to die at the hands of close relatives—is an essentially heroic act (Batianova 2000:157) and is believed to send the victim to the best of afterworlds, "the red blaze of aurora, [where] time is spent playing ball with a walrus-skull" (Bogoras 1904–09:563).

This being said, my argument concerning voluntary death among the Chukchi should not be taken as a definitive analysis. To claim this would be to give too much weight to the information at my disposal, which is both limited and fragmented. One important reason for this caveat is that I myself never witnessed an instance of voluntary death, although, as I describe below, an elderly man openly requested to be killed at the time of my fieldwork. Thus, I never made any firsthand observation of the actual killing of a human being but was restricted to writing down the accounts of people who attended such killings or, more frequently, who had heard them described by older relatives. What is more, I soon realized that eyewitness reports of voluntary death were extremely difficult to obtain because people systematically avoided the topic. Elena P. Batianova also noted this attitude, and she writes, "The custom [of voluntary death] survived until recently, and may still exist today. During six short field trips to the Chukchis and Koriaks between 1984 and 1990, I managed to document more than ten 'voluntary death' cases. However people talked about them as if they had taken place several years ago" (2000:155).

One important motive for this reticence is that Russian law considers participation in the killing of a family member homicide and people can be sent to prison for it. In fact, this happened to a man in Achaiyayam, who, in the 1980s, had to spend eight years behind bars in Petropavlovsk for killing his old and sick mother at her own request. One elderly informant explained to me, after I had succeeded in establishing a rather close friendship with her, "We all know that it [the killing] is going on, but we say nothing about it to each other, let alone to outsiders, because to the Russians it is murder." Nevertheless, over time I succeeded in collecting a few personal accounts that, together with the ethnographic descriptions of Bogoras and others, might help to shed light on the nature of voluntary death among the Chukchi. To lay the groundwork for my alternative interpretation of voluntary death, I first describe the Chukchi cosmos, with particular focus on the role of ritual blood sacrifice, which lies at the heart of the life-giving circulation of souls between the living and the dead.

The ownership and possession of souls

The Chukchi cosmos can perhaps best be described as a hall-of-mirrors world: Each thing is paired with almost endless doubles of itself, which extend in all directions and continually reflect and echo one another. For example, the much feared evil spirits, the *ke'let* (sing. *ke'le*) are said to live in camps and villages, travel about the country on sledges, and go hunting for prey as do human beings. The game they hunt, however, is the souls of men, which they call their "little seals" or "reindeer" (Bogoras 2007a:69, 2007b:48; Dolitsky 1997:35, 43). From the viewpoint of a human being, the ke'let have monstrous and terrifying features, such as hanging eyes, half-formed bodies, and large mouths full of teeth (Bogoras 1904–09:294, 2007a:15; Dolitsky 1997:28). Yet, from the viewpoint of the ke'let themselves, they are the ones who are human, and they regard the human shamans who can attack and kill them as ke'let—that is, as evil spirits (Bogoras 1904–09:295, 2007a:48, 86; Dolitsky 1997:47).[4] Indeed, every being, "[even] the shadows on the wall constitute definitive tribes and have their own country, where they live in huts and subsist by hunting" (Bogoras 1904–09:281).

This hall-of-mirrors logic is also apparent when applied to the world of the deceased, which is the focus of my analysis. Although the Chukchi offer blood sacrifices to different beings, those made in honor of the dead constitute the main feature of all major festivals.[5] Moreover, the deceased, who are called "pene'elin" in the Chukchi language, meaning "the ancient ones," are often conflated with other beings, such as the Supreme Beings, who are all denoted by the suffix *va'irgin*, meaning simply "existence" (Bogoras 1904–09:303); the Upper People (Tna'irgi-ra'mkin); the Morning-Dawn (Tna'irgin); and even the ke'let (Bogoras 1904–09:336–337). Although there is considerable overlap and confusion between the different spirit categories, in an important sense the deceased represent a prototypical notion of the spirit world as "experience reversed" (Leach 1976:81–93). Thus, the deceased are said to live in *irangas* (skin tents) with their families, just as the living do, and they also keep herds of domesticated reindeer; yet basic things are turned upside-down and inside-out: When it is night in the world of the living, it is day in the world of the deceased, and the same goes for

winter and summer. Moreover, the bodies of the deceased are turned the "wrong" way around (from the perspective of the living), so that they have the color of raw meat and their heads and feet bend backward. Also, the conception of time among the deceased is understood to be the direct inversion of ordinary forward-running time, so that "now" and "then," "before" and "after" are turned on their heads (Van Deusen 1999:115–116). Accordingly, people who eat fly-agaric mushrooms and travel to the world of the dead often report being away for months although only a few hours have passed in this world.

To speak of the "deceased" and the "living" is, however, not quite correct, because the beings in each of these categories see themselves as the living and the others as the dead ones (Bogoras 1904–09:331). Thus, when a person in this world dies or an animal is sacrificed, the soul goes to the next world, where it is reclothed with flesh. Each family group (Chuk. *va'rat*) is said to have an ancestral counterpart in the next world, and every newcomer to that world joins his or her own relatives, just as a reindeer that is slaughtered joins the family herd.[6] The ancestors, the Chukchi say, are always eager to receive the soul of the dead, because they experience it as the physical return of a long-deceased relative. Likewise, the souls of the ancestors, upon "death," return to this world through acts of spontaneous rebirth. As soon as a child is born, its family members ask what relative has come back and seek to discover the child's true identity by using a divining stone. The child is then given the name of the deceased person he or she is believed to be and takes, at least formally, that person's place within the wider network of kin.[7]

For the Chukchi then, death is an integral and necessary part of the creative circle of renewal. What is more, just as the living depend on the deceased for their supply of souls, so the deceased could be said to depend on the living to perform the acts of sacrifice that ensure the reproduction of their herds (Ingold 1986:255). One could also interpret the custom of voluntary death in these reciprocal and symmetrical terms—that is, as the direct result of people's obligation to reciprocate souls with the spirits (Hamayon 2001:136). However, the exchange relationship between the two realms is, in fact, mediated by fundamental aspects of asymmetry and hierarchy. First, the deceased are assigned a permanently superior status vis-à-vis the living because their world, although an exact replica of this world, does not have its troubles and sins. Thus, I was told that, in the world of the dead, people live in strict accordance with tradition and in prefect harmony and that there are no Russian elements. Moreover, and even more importantly, the deceased are believed to hold ultimate authority over life-giving souls. This was made clear to me by a Chukchi herder, who explained it this way: "It happens that a hundred or more head of reindeer just disappear. They are not to be found anywhere. I tell you, it is the deceased, who have taken back their property, for they are the true 'owners' [Rus. *khoziain*] of the herd. If they want to, they can take away all the reindeer just like that."

Let me explain the meaning of this statement, which provides important insight into Chukchi ideas about possession and ownership. When a child is born, a close relative of the deceased person who is believed to have returned in the child normally—but without being obliged to do so—gives the child a reindeer doe, so that the child can start building up his or her own private herd. The doe and all of its offspring, and their offspring, and so forth, are given the private earmark of the recipient, who can do with the animals as he or she pleases. However, when the original donor of the doe dies and a sacrificial animal is needed to accompany that person to the next world, his or her family will demand that the recipient provide an animal for slaughter, taken from the stock of animals that originated from the doe. This is because the original donor is understood to be the "true owner" of these animals, although the recipient holds the right to use them. So, the reindeer are at once property and possessions, at once given and kept (Weiner 1992). What is kept by the donor is the ownership, and what is given is possession, all of which means that ownership over the herds is ultimately traced back to the initial donors, the deceased ancestors, who originally gave their reindeer to their living kin, without the latter ever having asked (just as the newborn child does not ask for the reindeer given to it). Moreover, just as the ancestors were not obliged to give in the first place, so they are not obliged to accept or to give in return, because the debts owed them can never really be cancelled or even balanced out.

I take this last point from Maurice Godelier (1999:186), who criticizes Marcel Mauss for reducing sacrifice to a "contractual" bond that humans are said to hold with their deities. Thus, according to Mauss, "The purpose of destruction by sacrifice is precisely that it is an act of giving that is *necessarily reciprocated*" (1990:20, emphasis added). However, what Mauss fails to take into account, Godelier rightly argues, is "that the men approaching the gods are already in their debt, since it is from them that they have already received the conditions for their existence" (1999:30). This argument may also be leveled as a criticism against Roberte N. Hamayon (2001), who in her overarching and rather totalizing account of the circulation of souls between spirits and men in Siberian hunting societies, describes the exchange as "reciprocal and symmetric." However, as should be clear by now, this exchange is not between genuinely equal partners and cannot, therefore, be symmetrical or contractual, because among the Chukchi, at least, the spirits remain the true owners of the animals and they have both the right and the power to repossess their property at any given moment.

The ancestral owner appears to be represented by the family wooden fireboard, the most sacred of the Chukchi

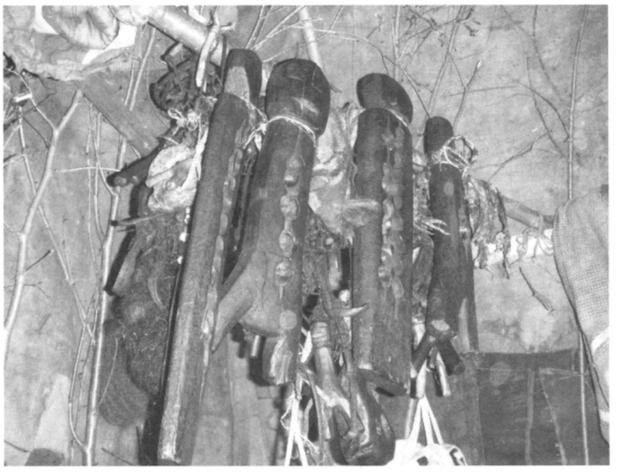

Figure 1. The sacred fireboards, the *gichgeyu* (sing. *gichgei*). Photo by Rane Willerslev.

Figure 2. The ka'mak-lu'u, which is body and soul at once. Photo by Rane Willerslev.

idols (see Figure 1). The fireboard is roughly carved in human form, and among the Chukchi of Achaiyayam it is called "gichgei" or "qaya'-eti'nvila'n," meaning the "master of the herd" (Jochelson 1908:34; Ragtytval' 1986:171). Each board goes with a private herd of reindeer and signifies the double proprietary rights associated with it, one belonging to its human possessor and the other to its ancestral owner, to whom the herd ultimately belongs.[8] Thus, when someone experiences a decline in the number of his or her livestock because of disease, bad weather, or other misfortunes, it is understood to be the result of the ancestor taking back his or her property. The fear of such losses is further intensified by the fact that souls are conceived of in terms of a limited number. Indeed, as Lee Guemple describes with regard to the Inuit, but which also holds true for the Chukchi, "the system ... is regarded as a closed 'circle': no new spiritual components can enter, and none are ever lost" (1994:118). One is, therefore, at least in principle, dealing with a fixed pool of souls that simply go round and round in an endless circle. This means that when the deceased have plenty of reindeer, the animals are scarce among the living and vice versa (Bogoras 1904–09:330). Both parties cannot be rich in reindeer at the same time.

The soul as helper of and traitor to its possessor

So far, I have mostly talked about animal souls, but what I have said about the critical distinction between property and possession holds true, in principle, for the souls of human beings as well as reindeer. To make this point clearly, however, I need to look into what the Chukchi understand as the soul. Their term, *uvi'rit* (Kory. *uyi'cit*), which is usually translated as *soul,* belongs to the linguistic root *uvi'k,* meaning, literally, *body* (Bogoras 1904–09:332), and there is, in fact, an important sense in which Chukchi souls are a form of bodies. Thus, unlike the Platonic body–soul dichotomy with its fixed appearance–essence distinction, the Chukchi understand body and soul to be flip sides of each other: People can turn themselves inside out, so to speak, in that the inner soul and the outer body can cross over and become the other.[9]

This interchangeability can perhaps best be illustrated by describing the workings of a small wooden amulet in the shape of a human figure that is regularly "fed" with tallow or bone marrow from sacrificed reindeer. The amulet is called "ka'mak-lu'u," meaning "wooden face," and is fastened in the armpit of a person's outer clothing (see Figure 2). It is said to provide its owner with the body of a ke'le, so that soul-eating spirits will see the owner as one of their own—that is, as a fellow human being as opposed to animal prey—and leave the person alone. The principal idea is that the person attaching the amulet to his or her own body transforms it into the soul of the ka'mak-lu'u, whereby the body becomes protected against predation from the ke'let. Thus, what comprises the inner soul and the outer body becomes a matter of perspective: From the viewpoint of the ka'mak-lu'u, one's human body is the soul, whereas, from the human viewpoint, the ka'mak-lu'u is the soul. For exactly this reason, the ka'mak-lu'u is also called "uvi'rit"—that is, the indigenous term for "soul," which implies that the amulet is a representation of the deceased ancestor one is said to be. Thus, just as the ka'mak-lu'u is body and soul at once, so it is also a deceased relative and a ke'le at once.[10]

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that although one's ka'mak-lu'u is generally considered a benevolent being, it is benevolent only in a very relative and dangerously unstable sense. Thus, I was told that, if not "fed," the ka'mak-lu'u will harm or even kill a person, just as the dead more generally are said to hunger for the lives of the living (Bogoras 1904–09:336–337). What this points to, I suggest,

is that just as the living and the dead, on the macroscale, are not equal partners in the exchange of souls, so, on the microscale, the relationship between one's body and soul is perceived in terms of an asymmetrical hierarchy of authority and power. A person is subordinate to his or her uvi'rit by being both descended from and dependent on it, in much the same way that the living are subordinate to their deceased relatives' ownership of reindeer. Whereas the living possess their own souls, the deceased retain ownership of them, and they can, therefore, at any given moment reclaim their property. When this happens, the person in question either falls ill and dies or, as I describe below, commits suicide.

Suicide—"a woman's death"

During my fieldwork, two youngsters—a girl and a boy—hanged themselves within a period of a few months. People in the village were quite aware that the personal motive behind the two suicides was "failed love," a common trigger of many youth suicides (see Pika 1993; see also Malinowski 1949:97). In fact, there is a general saying among the Chukchi that "young people kill themselves to harm their kin," meaning that suicide among youngsters often has the aim of hurting the feelings of others, most notably parents or lovers. Nevertheless, the general belief in the village was that the real cause behind the two suicides was to be found elsewhere, in the infraction of a taboo during the yearly slaughter of reindeer in memory of the dead (Chuk. *paminki*). Thus, instead of keeping the offerings of sacrifice to the deceased clearly separate from the slaughter for domestic consumption, as one ought to do, several families had brought meat back from the sacrificial setting to their own households. This had led to a temporary but highly dangerous confusion of the normal separation between the realms of the living and the dead. In the words of an elderly woman, "A pathway has been opened to the deceased. For this reason, people long dead walk around looking for their kin. Individuals, who have a weak mind or no [magical] protection, will die as a result. This is why the two young people hanged themselves. They were easy targets for the deceased."

The Chukchi do not usually condemn suicide as a sin, and people who die in this way undergo the same funeral rite as others, just as they are believed to go to the same afterworld. Nevertheless a clear distinction is drawn between how ordinary suicide and voluntary death are conceived and morally judged. Whereas voluntary death is, as already mentioned, generally seen as a highly praiseworthy death, self-murder is considered a sign of weakness of character—"a woman's death." The suicidal person is seen as controlled by and subordinated to the spirit of the dead ancestor that he or she is said to incarnate. This finds expression in strange and antisocial behavior, as when a youngster starts babbling unintelligibly, threatens others with personal violence or roughly insults them, and eventually kills him- or herself. The suicidal person is effectively acting in accordance with the social and moral code of the deceased, which, from the viewpoint of the living, is a direct inversion of ordinary social behavior.

Below, I elaborate on the crucial difference between voluntary death and suicide. First, I turn to the topic of ritual blood sacrifice, reconsidering its socioreligious function. For, one may ask, why do the living make bloody offerings to the deceased, when all life already belongs to them?

Sacrifice as substitution

As I have noted, sacrifice among the Chukchi, rather than being a form of gift exchange, which implies a relationship of mutual obligation, occurs within an atmosphere of unconditional indebtedness toward the deceased. This implies that even if multiple transaction meanings are evoked (see Ssorin-Chaikov 2000), such as those of gratitude, payment, tribute, and ransom, they are all token acknowledgments of the deceased's absolute authority over the life offered. This attitude of subjection is also reflected in the short prayers or invocations that sometimes accompany the killings: "Oh, this is for you, make the herds thrive" or "Take this and let us live without suffering." The principal idea is that by offering them a few lives and by appealing to them in tones that assert their absolute superiority, the living may evoke feelings of pity or even love in the deceased, who will then let their living kin keep most of the life-giving souls for themselves. This is not to be understood as the Chukchi seeking to establish communion with the deceased. In fact, quite the opposite is true. What Georges Gusdorf says of sacrifice in general, that "it is made not only to the gods but against the gods" (Evans-Prichard 1954:23), is true for the Chukchi, whose overall intention is to give up as few lives as possible and to retain the many.

I shall return to discuss in more detail this essentially disjunctive feature of Chukchi sacrifice. For now, I consider what the living could possibly give to the deceased in return for allowing them to keep most lives for themselves. The answer is that the victim of the sacrifice, which prototypically is a reindeer, stands in for the person or persons who are making the sacrifice or on whose behalf the sacrifice is made (see Figure 3). As E. E. Evans-Prichard puts it with regard to the Nuer, "When [they] give their cattle in sacrifice they are very much, and in a very intimate way, giving a part of themselves" (1954:27). This is clearly true of the Chukchi as well, who identify very strongly with their livestock. All the animals of an individual owner have a particular earmark that identifies them as belonging to him or her. Moreover, during the autumn festival, which is

Figure 3. The sacrifice of a reindeer. Photo by Rane Willerslev.

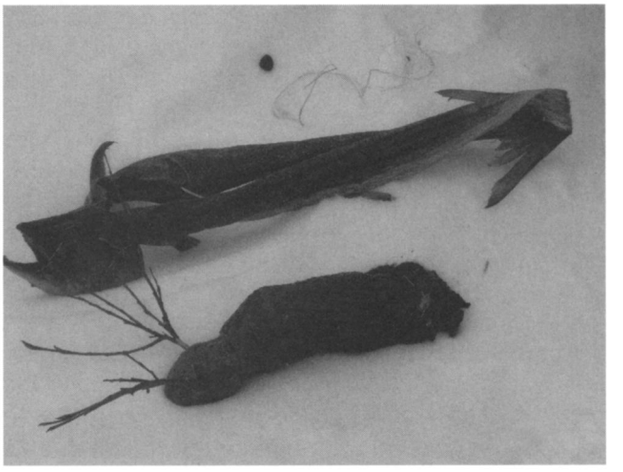

Figure 4. The chain of surrogate substitutions. Photo by Rane Willerslev.

accompanied by offerings of sacrifice to the dead, the blood of the first reindeer slaughtered, a fawn, is used to paint designs on the faces of all the members of the family that owns it. The idea is to make the face of the wearer look like that of a reindeer or—as Bogoras (1904–09:360) suggests—its associated spiritual being. Although the designs are quite simple, indicating the animal's eyes, ears, and mouth, they clearly suggest that the sacrificer here takes on the identity of the animal victim, so that what is consecrated and sacrificed is in some important sense the human being.

Still, the sacrificer does not offer him- or herself literally; it is a reindeer that is killed, not the human. In fact, at times a real animal is not used, but, rather, a surrogate for the beast is sacrificed. The prototypical surrogate is a sausage (Chuk. *zyozyat*) made by stuffing the third stomach of a reindeer with fat from its intestines (Plattet 2005:194), but a fish or a stone might also serve as a substitute (see Figure 4). Even a small wooden image of the sausage may be used, making the substitution triple (Bogoras 1904–09:369). Each substitute is regarded as taking the place of a real reindeer and is, therefore, stabbed with a knife to represent actual slaughter.

The underlying logic appears to be that these surrogate victims are made into symbols of the sacrificer, for as J. H. M. Beattie points out, "Whatever else a symbol is, it is essentially and by definition something that stands for, 'symbolizes,' something else" (1980:30). Chukchi sacrifice is, therefore, really about the symbolic displacement of ritual violence from the human donor to the animal and beyond, to an almost endless chain of substitutions. However, although the substitute stands in for the original human victim, the deceased do not forget or deny that it is a substitute, and they continue to await the return of the souls of their living human kinsmen. In a fundamental sense, therefore, the sacrificer seeks to postpone, for as long as possible, his or her own death or that of relatives by offering substitutes for real human lives. In this sense, sacrifice is a calculated action, a technology of time manipulation, so to speak, in that the delay or time lag generated through the killing of substitutes is what allows human life to continue (see Hamayon 2001:135). In a very basic sense, then, as Brian K. Smith and Wendy Doniger point out, "Anything that one sacrifices is a surrogate for the ultimate paradigm underlying all sacrifices, the sacrifice of oneself. The least symbolic of all sacrifices is the suicidal human sacrifice, in which the symbol stands for itself" (1989:190–191).

Does this then mean that suicide is the optimal sacrifice? One could be led to think so, and this is, in fact, what Sylvain Lévi seems to suggest, when he writes that "the only authentic sacrifice would be suicide" (1898:32–33). Indeed, the notion of suicide being the primordial sacrifice appears in numerous myths around the world. Thus, the Nordic god Odin, who was also called the "God of the hanged," as men and animals were strung up in his honor, was said to originally have died by hanging, as a sacrifice to himself (Frazer 1960:467). Likewise, the God–man Christ lets himself be sacrificed to himself to reconcile humanity's sins and to secure eternal life for those who believe in him (Hefner 1980). In the Chukchi tradition, one finds the creator of the world, the trickster figure Raven, also called "Ku'urkil," meaning "the self-created one," killing or eating himself and then resurrecting himself from the dead (Bogoras 2007a:67, 2007b:33, 39–40).

Still, only in the paradoxical realm of myths can suicide be sacrifice. In the real world of living human beings, this can never be the case. The generic unity of sacrifice, as Henri Hubert and Mauss point out, requires a triangular model, including a "sacrificer," a "deity," and a "victim"—without which "there is no sacrifice" (1964:100). Why is this triangular relation important? As I have described, the

Chukchi do not postulate an insuperable ontological barrier between the living and the dead. Quite the opposite: Through acts of spontaneous rebirth, people share, from the outset, an unstable condition in which the personal characteristics of their ancestral relatives are mixed with their own—that is, no clear differences or divisions between humanity and divinity are apparent. However, this does not mean that the Chukchi are not preoccupied with differentiating themselves from the deceased. On the contrary, the lack of any definitive a priori difference means that difference has to be constantly created through everyday ritual practices that demonstrate it. Sacrifice, I suggest, is such a display of difference. It creates social separation between the two realms, which, in turn, is the precondition for human existence, because, without such distinction, there is no life for humanity. Thus, in youthful suicides, the person–ancestor relation is dominated by confused identifications, marked by the youngster's wild, antisocial behavior. One might say that the youngster is caught in an enclosed, circular relationship with his or her deceased other, making any relations with a "third"—that is, social relations—impossible. Social relations depend on the mediation of this dyadic, enclosed relationship, in which the living are held in thrall by their deceased kinsmen. Each apex in the sacrificial triangle mediates the relationship between the other two apexes. First, by virtue of the use of a substitute, the sacrificer is set apart from the victim that stands in his or her place. Moreover, the sacrificial destruction of the victim creates a separation between the living as donor and the deceased as recipient—that is, humanity and divinity are defined with respect to one another. This definition signifies that the interests of the two parties are no longer the same, because the parties have, by means of their separation, come to possess different social positions in the transaction in which they now perceive one another (see Strathern 1988:177). In contrast, the suicidal person remains trapped in a dyadic relationship of immediate identification with the dead, thus acting in accordance with the deceased's perspective and intent.

As should be clear by now, one need not delve very deeply into Chukchi sacrifice to realize that it, quite crucially, serves to detach the deceased from the living rather than to integrate them, which, in turn, allows for social relations to occur between the two. In this sense, the Chukchi attitude toward sacrifice is clearly disjunctive (aiming at separation), as opposed to conjunctive (aiming at close contact), in that it effectively asks the dead "to turn away from the living rather than seeking closer union with them" (Beattie 1980:38). Still, the sacrificing congregation wants to experience the effects of ancestral blessing in an unmediated form: good weather, abundance of foodstuff for the reindeer, protection against wolves, and so on. Thus, the sacrifice does not serve only to push away the dead. Through the victim, which is partly sacred, partly profane, a bridge is established, across which the potency of the deceased can flow (Hubert and Mauss 1964:44). However, such bridges must not be permanent and must only be established within a clearly marked-off space for fear that the deceased might get a firm foothold within the world of the living, which, as I have indicated, would bring madness and death, rather than fullness of life.

Voluntary death as sacrifice

With these observations in mind, let me turn to discuss the key issue that interests me, namely, voluntary death as sacrifice. As I have noted, it is substitution that defines sacrifice as sacrifice. Sacrifice is essentially a game of displacement and replacement, in that sacrifice of a thing is a surrogate act for the ultimate paradigm underlying all sacrifices, the sacrifice of oneself. Paradoxically, however, suicide remains unmediated by substitution and, as such, cannot qualify as sacrifice. This, in turn, makes it possible to conceive of sacrifice as categorically different from suicide—indeed, as precisely a ritual inversion of suicide (Smith and Doniger 1989:201). Yet suicide may serve as a gauge of the worth of sacrifice. Sacrifice is always a shadow of itself, in that it substitutes for the impossible real act, the sacrifice of oneself. So, although suicide is not sacrifice (except in the paradoxical realm of myth), it nevertheless functions as a kind of unattainable "ideal" through which the value of any actual sacrifice is measured. However—and this is the key point—although all sacrificial acts can be seen as deviations from this ideal, some are closer to it than others. Thus, with regard to the whole chain of potential surrogates, some are of greater worth than others.

Among the Chukchi, the hierarchy of acceptable substitutes moves from the most complex, highly esteemed, and rare, to the simpler and more common. A reindeer doe, for example, is more valuable than a reindeer bull, which, in turn, is more valuable than a sausage, which is more valuable than a wooden image of the sausage, and so on. The chain ends with the minimally acceptable: a stone. Moreover, the Chukchi are not only aware of the hierarchical graduation of surrogates but they are also quite explicit about the hierarchy of rewards: The greater the crisis, the higher the offering should be, the more valuable the surrogate and the more complete its surrender. As one Chukchi put it, "The deceased aren't stupid. They are awaiting our death in excitement." What this quite clearly points to is that the hierarchical distinctions are never lost in the process of sacrificial surrogations. Sacrificial substitution is guided, and indeed made possible, by symbolic resemblance, but the difference between the original and its surrogate counterparts is never forgotten by the deceased. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the human being is proclaimed the highest and—from the viewpoint of the deceased—the most desirable of all possible sacrificial

victims. As such, the human being functions as the perfect victim, with animals and other surrogates as inferior substitutes. This brings me back full circle to my main assertion, introduced in the beginning of this article, namely, that voluntary death is essentially the optimal sacrifice against which all other types of ritual blood sacrifices are ultimately measured.

But what ethnographic evidence can I really pull together to support this claim? The question is extremely complicated, and I can only treat it here in bold strokes. Let me begin by pointing out that I am not the first to suggest that voluntary death is a type of sacrifice. Bogoras makes this suggestion in his classical work on the Chukchi.[11] However, he provides very little ethnographic evidence for his claim but simply writes that "voluntary death cannot be considered other than a bloody sacrifice" (Bogoras 1904–09:563). One of his critics, D. K. Zelenin (1937:57) wanted to nail him down on this, arguing that he was wrong and that voluntary death and sacrifice should not be confused, on the principle that the former is not ceremonial but practical. Yet evidence might, in fact, be available to support Bogoras's original assertion. Consider one of the few descriptions of voluntary death that I succeeded in collecting during my fieldwork:

> My grandfather must have been nearly 90 years old. One day he said, "I am tired, help me go to my relatives." He pointed at my father, who got all pale, but did not dare to refuse him. My grandfather put on his funeral clothing and my mother and I prepared him the best food. We all sat together, taking turns telling good things about him. He said to us that he would continue to look after us and we should not fear him. Then all the females and children left the tent. I was later told that my father emptied a bullet of half of its gunpowder [so as not to blow his head off]. My grandfather put the [gun's] barrel on his forehead, and my father shot him dead. When we were called back to the tent, the dead body was covered with some skins. My father took some of the blood and painted dots on all our faces. Sometime afterwards, my father was afraid that he would be punished for his sin. But he died an old man.[12]

The narrative is representative of others that I recorded, and it has a striking resemblance to accounts of the ritual blood sacrifice of an animal. First, the grandfather completely surrenders himself to death, as should an animal victim when sacrificed. In fact, Bogoras describes how a person who desires to die a voluntary death often declares, "Treat me like a reindeer" or "Treat me like quarry" (1904–09:562).[13] Second, the family members paint their faces with the dead grandfather's blood, as they would do with the blood of the reindeer killed during the autumn slaughter. As in the sacrifice of the reindeer, this appears to be a gesture of identification with the victim. Moreover, like a sacrificial victim, the grandfather is considered somewhat "sacred" and therefore is treated to the best food as a special and emphatic expression within the sacrificial situation. It is his sacrality that makes him declare that "he will look after his relatives," in much the same way that the deceased are expected to look after their living kin. But the story also reveals a paradox: Because the grandfather is sacred, his killer is guilty of bloodshed, yet the grandfather is sacred only because he is to be killed. For this reason, the family is anxious about carrying out the request. Still, they must do so, because, as Bogoras states, "Failure to fulfill the promise of the [human] sacrifice brings . . . severe anger and retaliation on the part of the spirits" (1904–09:563–564).

All of this, I suggest, indicates that the practice of voluntary death among the Chukchi closely parallels animal sacrifice. This is not to say that the two are completely identical or necessarily share all of the same features. But there are, as I hope to have shown, strong continuities, overlaps, and crisscrossings, which suggest that the two belong to the same category of phenomena.

However, my argument can be taken to an even more fundamental level of analysis. All sacrifices appear to have a common dominator: the maintenance and furthering of life through the act of taking life (Mack 1987:3). This, I assert, applies to voluntary death as well. As already indicated, the killing of elderly family members has continued among certain groups of Chukchi, occurring even during the peak of Soviet power, most likely because these ritual offerings are seen as necessary for maintaining the great circulation of souls between the worlds of the living and the dead. Still, there are indications that making the highest offering becomes even more desirable during times of serious crises. This happened, for example, during the devastating plague in 1814, which killed a great number of people and reindeer. The desperate situation, as Ferdinand Wrangell writes (1842:122), led to the ritual killing of Kotschen, a highly respected elderly leader among the Chaun Chukchi, to appease the incensed spirits. The case is extraordinary, because, at first, Kotschen, along with rest of his group, did not believe the claim of the shamans that the spirits wished for his death. However, as the plague continued, "Kotschen himself . . . declared his willingness to submit" (Wrangell 1842:122). Commanded by his father's request and terrified by his threatened curse, Kotschen's son eventually plunged a knife into his father's heart. Likewise, Zelenin (1937) and Batianova (2000) describe historical cases in which elderly Chukchi were put to death in the hope of bringing an epidemic to an end. In these cases, the elderly victims appear to have willingly demanded their own deaths.

During the present economic and environmental upheaval, one might perhaps detect the impulse toward human sacrifice building up again. As already pointed out, the closest I came to directly encountering an incidence of

voluntary death was when an elderly man walked around the village requesting that his relatives kill him. A few days afterward, he was found hanged in his bedroom. According to their statements, all of his kin had refused to assist him because they feared being charged with homicide by the Russian authorities, and they explained that he had killed himself.[14] Still, that the old man would ask for assistance suggests that the tradition of voluntary death is still practiced, albeit in secret. Moreover, a few days before his death, several old women were seen sitting together, finishing his funeral costume.[15] So they knew of his imminent death. Even more importantly, one of my close informants, an elderly woman, explained,

> He might have been killed or he might not. I don't know. What I do know, however, is that he felt miserable, not only from sickness and old age, but because he saw his people suffer. They have no money and their reindeer are dying. The few reindeer left are given in offerings, but with no effect. The old man probably wanted to bring the young generation fullness of life. Some old people think like that: I am old and tired, let my relatives help me go to the other side, perhaps then the "ancient ones" will support them.

If, indeed, voluntary death is sacrifice, as I have proposed here, then it represents not only the highest bid for divine favor but also the most terrifying to carry out. It is, therefore, a rarely realized sacrifice. An animal will customarily be offered instead of a human being, but the efficacy of the human victim lies precisely in his or her humanity, which is why the ritual killing of a family member represents the optimal sacrifice. Its importance lies exactly in the fact that it signifies, in an overwhelmingly present and powerful manner, how the exchange of soul-stuff with the deceased ought to be carried out, which stands in contrast to how it is usually carried out, through animal offerings. The human sacrifice thus provides a kind of focusing lens on other, inferior, types of sacrifices, allowing their full symbolic significance to be perceived—a significance that they express but are incapable of effectuating. In other words, the human sacrifice provides an occasion for reflection on the fact that what ought to be killed is not usually killed but is exceptional.

Notes

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1. Here I take inspiration from Jonathan Z. Smith, who sees ritual as "a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary uncontrolled, course of things" (1982:63).

2. The village of Achaiyayam, where many Chukchi reside, is remarkable in that people there owned private herds of reindeer throughout the Soviet period, even though most reindeer were appropriated in the 1930s during collectivization (King 2002:141). Salmon fishing is also important for subsistence during the summer, whereas hunting is less significant.

3. The inhabitants of Achaiyayam number about four hundred people. I spent three months in the village in 1992 and another six months between 2007 and 2008. Achaiyayam is located close to the border between Kamchatka and Chukotka, and for the most part the people speak a dialect of the Koryak language (Chavchuven). This has led certain Russian scholars to classify them as Koryak (see, e.g., Gorbacheva 1985). However, virtually all of the people refer to themselves as Chukchi (Plattet 2005:72), which is why I refer to them by this name. Moreover, as both Waldemar Jochelson (1908:1) and Alexander D. King (2002:160) have pointed out, the two groups are rather similar in terms of language, culture, and religious ideas.

4. This is a perfect example of what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) calls "perspectival ontology," which is found in the Americas (Brightman 1993; Fausto 2007; Tanner 1979), North Asia (Pedersen 2001; Willerslev 2004, 2007), and Southeast Asia (Howell 1984).

5. For an excellent description of one of these yearly festivals, the *kilvéi*, which takes place in spring, see Vaté 2005.

6. For very similar ideas among the Siberian Khanty, see Jordan 2003:126.

7. For very similar ideas about rebirth among the Inuit, see Nuttall 1994 and Bodenhorn 2000.

8. Although most herders that I spoke to consider the gichgei to be male, some Chukchi myths ascribe the creation of the reindeer to a heroine, the "creating woman" (Bogoras 2007a:146; Dolitsky 1997:3). In any case, a deceased relative is commemorated during the yearly sacrificial festival, the *paminki*. After that, he or she passes into the category of generalized ancestors represented by the sacred fireboard. The board plays an important role during all major festivals, during which it is smeared with blood or raw marrow from the animals sacrificed.

9. In Koryak mythology, there are several spirits that turn themselves inside out (Jochelson 1908:29–30). A hasty glance through the massive compendium of North American Indian soul conceptions collected by Åke Hultkrantz reveals a somewhat similar idea of body and soul as reversible: "Alongside the conception of the soul as a fragile, ethereal substance—and without ousting this notion—we find at the same time the tendency to conceive the soul as a perceptible object. The soul is therefore vested with a not inconsiderable measure of coarse materiality, which has sometimes surprised European investigators" (1953:391). Emile Durkheim points to a similar conception among Australian Aborigines, writing, "It would be a misunderstanding to conceive the body as a kind of lodging in which the soul resides but with which it has only external relations. Quite the contrary, it is bound to the body with the closest of ties ... There is not only close interdependence ... but also partial assimilation" (1995:254).

10. This dual nature of one's incarnation also seems to be reflected in the personal names that the living inherit from the deceased, such as Good Vulva or Hairy Buttocks. These are essentially the names of the ke'let and make these spirits believe that the persons so named are fellow human beings as opposed to animal prey.

11. Batianova (2000:152) also links voluntary death to sacrifice. However, she does not provide any evidence for her claim, other than referencing Bogoras and Wrangell.

12. In other accounts that I recorded, the victim is killed with a spear or a knife or is strangled.

13. The latter expression may at first seem to have a metaphorical connection with hunting rather than with animal sacrifice. Although much classical anthropology (see, e.g., Jensen 1963: 162–190) has separated hunting and sacrifice on the principle that a wild beast must be seen in opposition to a domestic animal, some interpretative theories of sacrifice have quite convincingly argued for a plausible grounding—if not origin—of ritual blood sacrifice in hunting (Burkert 1983:12–22; Ingold 1986; Valeri 1994). The main point put forward in these writings is that there is "a bottom-line identity between the ritual slaughter of the hunt and the sacrificial slaughter" (Valeri 1994:112).

14. This fear of being charged with homicide was more prevalent in Soviet times. Today, the local authorities do not seem to take much notice of so-called criminal activities in indigenous villages. Thus, at one point during my fieldwork, when a young boy was murdered, the police did not investigate but wrote their report from a distance, and the murderer was never arrested.

15. I am grateful to Patrick Plattet for this observation. During part of my fieldwork, he also conducted research in the village of Achaiyayam.

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