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Human Sacrifice and Propaganda in Popular Media: More Than Morbid Curiosity

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ABSTRACT:

Representations of human sacrifice, whether based upon real or fictitious events, powerfully demonstrate societal norms and fascinations related to the acceptability of slaying humans for religious or national interests, particularly given the divisive and bloody nature of the topic. Readers of eye-witness accounts, newspaper reports, and historical narratives, and viewers of cinematic productions, war posters, and political cartoons come face to face with the beliefs and agendas of the creators of popular media. Such sources represent the slaying of victims in sacred rituals, as individuals attempt to demarcate societal boundaries along the etic/emic spectrum, be they commentaries on their own cultures or on contemporary foreigners. Those who write about or portray human sacrifice have, in several instances, done so with propagandistic aims related to ethnocentrism, imperialism, and a perceived religious superiority that transfer the topic beyond the realm of mere morbid curiosity to justify forms of dominance like territorial conquest, militarism, and slavery. Moving from the ancient world to contemporary cinema, this study demonstrates both the antiquity of such propagandistic goals and their relevancy to recent portrayals of human sacrifice in film. While *Apocalypto* (2007) and *The Wicker Man* (1973) align closely with the historical examples presented, especially in relation to the issue of a perceived Christian ascendancy, *The Purge* (2013) largely diverges from them. *The Purge* counters a dominant American ideal that sacrifice for the state is valuable and accentuates the need to protect ethnic minorities from oppression.

Keywords: human sacrifice, ethnocentrism, imperialism, religious superiority, propaganda, *sati*, India, West Africa, Rome, Meso-America, United States, *Apocalypto*, *The Wicker Man*, and *The Purge*.

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Human sacrifice is an act of extreme piety that defies the logic of outsiders, who categorize it as murderous, barbarous, and irreligious. For the uninitiated, the rite is not only felonious, but it is antiquated and unenlightened.¹ Practitioners, conversely, regard it as valid, effective, and necessary. Human sacrifice, for them, is both sanctioned and sacred. It has been performed for diverse reasons from burying people as attendants for deceased societal elites to killing victims in order to avert military conquest to slaying children in fulfillment of vows to burning widows on behalf of deceased husbands to much more. At the most basic level, human sacrifice is a ritualized killing intent on affecting such entities as deities, spiritual powers, and deceased humans. Opinions about the legitimacy of any slaying are always filtered through an individual's societal context. Thus, what one person considers sacrificial, another may view as homicidal.²

Human sacrifice has long fascinated audiences and spectators, many of whom have been enticed by morbid curiosity to become peripheral participants in a practice that they may or may not view as legitimate. Propagandistic sacrificial imagery is very ancient. Egyptian monarchs, for example, decorated their temples with sacrificial or sacrifice-like conquest scenes in which the Egyptian ruler holds a bound victim in one hand and a weapon in the other that is menacingly positioned to dispatch the victim, typically in the presence of a deity. The general populace would have been familiar with such smiting images. According to Schulman, the motif was "found on a plethora of different kinds of lesser objects, royal and non-royal alike, ranging from scarabs, pectorals, and other types of jewelry, to weapons, artists' sketches, and stelae" (Schulman 8). The motif propagates the exploits of divine-kings and conveys the image of military might. Even the 1st CE Emperor of Rome, Domitian, could not help but to have himself depicted as such a conquering pharaoh on the walls of an Egyptian temple in Esna (Hollof). He thereby participated in an ancient tradition of artistic propaganda related to conquest; in doing so, Domitian demonstrated to the Egyptians that Rome stood victorious and that the emperor was the rightful pharaoh.

Julius Caesar employed different sacrificial imagery, i.e., the Celtic rite of burning humans in wicker men, as part of his efforts to strengthen his position in Rome during the last decades of the Republic; his propagandistic work serves as the starting point for this article's analysis, which culminates with a treatment of contemporary cinematography that emphasizes the propagandistic implications of *The Purge*. In a *New York Times* review of James DeMonaco's film, *The Purge*, Dargis notes the movie's association with human sacrifice and connects the production to other popular works, such as "The Lottery" and *The Hunger Games* (Dargis). While the film provides simplistic sacrificial correlations, such as a religious-styled service towards the end of the film, *The Purge* still falls in line with other literary, artistic, and cinematic productions that incorporate sacrificial (or sacrifice-like) practices in order to align readers or viewers to the perspectives espoused by the creators. *The Purge* does not represent an isolated case and it will be discussed in conjunction with the films *Apocalypto* and *The Wicker Man*, demonstrating that the latter films correlate with earlier propagandistic works from modernity and antiquity by valorizing the dominance of Christian sacrificial ideals against localized expressions of human sacrifice. *The Purge*, however, runs counter to imperialism and ethnic domination to comment on race relations in the United States and on the loss of lives for nationalistic purposes. Thus, in addition to the employment of human sacrificial language and/or representations in propaganda related to the politics of imperialism, the motif is also connected to explicit or implicit ethnocentric and religious goals. Such categories are not mutually exclusive, however, given that the topic of human sacrifice can function to further religious views of superiority, ethnocentric ideals, and political objectives like imperialism in a single

1) I wish to thank Ella Howard, Lynnette Porter, and the anonymous reviewers of this study for providing valuable comments on earlier versions of this article. Any errors or shortcomings are my own. I would also like to acknowledge my students who have provided valuable input on the topic of human sacrifice over the years. It is because of them, particularly Francis Boes, that I came to recognize the existence of a secularized concept of human sacrifice that relates to dying for nationalistic interests.

2) See Tatlock ("How in Ancient Times" 1 ff) for more information on matters addressed in this paragraph.

source. Creators, moreover, may capitalize upon morbid curiosity, blood-lust, or shock-value in order to gain support for a given agenda.

As for popular media, the issue is more complicated in the ancient world than for the contemporary sphere due to the lower number of people who could read and write and the slower spread of data in antiquity. Information is currently available in a variety of easily accessible media in an interconnected web of source sharing. Even the once formidable barrier of needing to understand a foreign language is more readily mitigated today with automated translations. Indeed, there is such a significant amount of data available to the general population that people are being trained in information literacy in order to better process the overwhelming amount of material. Reading and writing skills were less common in ancient times than they are today, and accessibility to popular written and visual material was more limited. The dichotomy between elite and popular material was more sharply defined in premodern days than it is now, and it is such a dichotomy between the elite and non-elite that Toner uses to designate the popular culture of ancient Rome. Ancient popular culture, for Toner, constituted a subordinated and unofficial part of society. It was the culture of the masses (1). The designation between non-elite and elite culture can be applied to other ancient groups as well, but it should be remembered that overlap did occur. Elites and non-elites have always shared aspects of culture, and the same is true today, particularly due to the easy accessibility of media in this current age. Hence, it is unnecessary to restrict the concept of popular media solely to sources directed towards non-elites. As referenced below, Caesar's war narratives were known by people other than his peers and a letter written by Cortes to the Spanish crown received wide circulation.

Human Sacrifice in Ancient Propaganda: A Roman Example

In ancient times, the Romans were concerned about human sacrifice, both within Roman society and beyond it. They acted in an official capacity to establish a law intent on stopping immolation amongst themselves. On this matter, Schultz provides a translation of what Pliny the Elder had to say in *Natural History* 30.4 (12): "it cannot be overestimated how much is owed to the Romans, who did away with those monstrous rites in which it was considered the greatest religious scruple to kill a man." The Senate's actions to make human immolation illegal, which Pliny the Elder discusses shortly before this passage (*Natural History* 30.3), may reflect an attempt to re-conceptualize Romanness in contrast to the sacrificial practices of their enemies. First century BCE writing addressed human sacrifice among the Gauls (i.e., the Celts living in the region of modern France), which is also the time frame in which one finds the initial accusations concerning human sacrifice among the inhabitants of Carthage (i.e., the Phoenicians or Punic people situated in modern Tunisia).³ Human sacrifice, so it is argued, became an identifier of wrongful and non-Roman religiosity (Orlin 196-97). With this in mind, one can be suspicious of Roman texts that may incorporate the sacrificial practices of the "other," but such caution need not result automatically in rejecting the veracity of human sacrifice accounts by outsiders. For the purposes of this study, the truthfulness of propagandistic claims makes little difference because the perception (not reality) of human sacrifice is of utmost concern here.⁴

Regardless of his accuracy in recounting his time among the Celts, Caesar helped popularize Gallic human sacrifice in his work on Gaul (*The Gallic War* 6.16), and it is possible that Caesar addressed the topic

3) Regarding ancient Tunisia, one can see a tendency among certain scholars and leaders to paint a more positive picture of their ancestors. Some have refused to accept the perspective that the Carthaginians practiced child sacrifice—tour guides are even taught to deny that it occurred. A positive emphasis on the past has been motivated in part by a governmental reaction against political Islamists, who have emphasized Carthaginian immolation in an effort to contrast Tunisia's past with the advancements ushered in under Islam (Higgins).

4) Implicit in Garnand's analysis of Greco-Roman sources on human sacrifice among foreigners is the argument that the sources point to the practice of child sacrifice among the Phoenicians (or Punic people) because of the typical manner by which the Greco-Roman authors wrote about foreign sacrifice. The writers tended to identify the sacrifice of the elderly, prisoners of war, and foreigners among people living at the periphery of the Greek and Roman world; yet, the additional accusation of child sacrifice is leveled at the Phoenicians, which potentially points to the existence of this form of sacrifice among them due to the relative uniqueness of the accusation.

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as a means of justifying his subjugating activities in the region or as a way to induce a negative emotional response within his audience.⁵ Caesar's self-interest was served by "seeing the Celts demonised as human-sacrificing savages" (Koven 9) and his work should be considered propagandistic (Barlow 158). Caesar may have specifically tailored his propaganda to garner favor among the general Roman populace in his internecine conflict at home. Historical writing was a form of public entertainment during the days of the late Republic and Caesar's work was ostensibly read in the hearing of a general audience, with books 5-6 purposefully composed to regain Rome's confidence in him (Wiseman 4-7).

One of the passages from Caesar's *The Gallic War* that was purportedly read to the general Roman populace describes human sacrifice.⁶ In speaking about his foes, Caesar explains that the Gauls (or Celts) were a particularly religious group, resorting to human sacrificial vows or human sacrifices in the face of peril, significant sickness, and warfare. Human sacrifice was both an individualized and state affair. Of the latter type, the wicker man sacrifices are perhaps the best known. Caesar describes the rite as follows in *The Gallic War* 6.16 (127-28):

Some of them use huge images of the gods, and fill their limbs, which are woven from wicker, with living people. When these images are set on fire the people inside are engulfed in flames and killed. They believe that the gods are more pleased by such punishment when it is inflicted upon those who are caught engaged in theft or robbery or other crimes; but if there is a lack of people of this kind, they will even stoop to punishing the guiltless.

One can detect a degree of negativity in the account, as the end of the quotation demonstrates by its derogatory description that the Gauls "stoop" to include innocent sacrificial victims. Romans would have been interested in Caesar's portrayal of wicker man sacrifice as a representation of how their enemy (or the "other") lived.⁷ The Romans are characteristically known as having possessed a keen interest in violent spectacles, most notably, their fascination with gladiatorial affairs, a form of popular violence. Ancient Romans would also have appreciated the idea of ritually and spectacularly killing the guilty since they did so in conjunction with triumphal celebrations, which may have included human sacrifice (Futrell 190-91). Thus, some Romans may not have endorsed the Gallic sacrificial practice, but many Romans could have appreciated the intention behind it.

Beyond mere appreciation, a passage from Livy (22.57.6) supports the idea that some Romans endorsed human sacrifice. Livy, however, thought that an incident in which foreigners were sacrificed was antithetical to Roman religiosity, noting that it had been done "in a least Roman rite" (Várhelyi 284). Plutarch recognized the hypocrisy embodied by Roman imperial interests in terms of their reaction to human sacrifice. Thus, Plutarch's *Roman Questions* reads (125):

When the Romans learned that the people called Bletonessii, a barbarian tribe, had sacrificed a man to the gods, why did they send for the tribal rulers with intent to punish them, but, when it was made plain that they had done thus in accordance with a certain custom, why did the Romans set them at liberty, but forbid the practice for the future? Yet they themselves, not many years before, had buried alive two men and two women, two of them Greeks, two Gauls, in the place called the Forum Boarium.

For Plutarch, the Romans acted in a duplicitous manner in attacking a religious practice of outsiders while

5) Cunliffe raises both possibilities, but indicates that Caesar provided his account without infusing it with ethical criticism (80).

6) For a discussion of the debate surrounding Caesar's audience and skepticism of Wiseman's reconstruction, see Riggsby (12-14).

7) Wicker man sacrifice was not of interest solely to citizens of Rome, inasmuch as it has fascinated modern audiences, too, such as the 1973 film discussed later in this article.

having recently engaged in the same behavior in their home city, which is where the Forum Boarium was located. Still, the example demonstrates how human sacrifice can be considered as essentially a foreign practice even among a group that had considered it valid. One can see here as well the notion of imperialism and the outlawing of sacrificial practices deemed unacceptable by the dominating group. Plutarch was, therefore, correct in accusing the Romans of duplicate behavior: human sacrifice was practiced by the Romans at times, but when they encountered the rite among neighboring groups, they suppressed it (cf. Schultz 20). This is reminiscent of the relationship between Christianity, western imperialism, and human sacrifice found in modern propaganda.

Human Sacrifice in Modern Propaganda: Examples from India, Africa, and the Americas

Later Europeans regarded sacrifice as something outside of their cultural purview and used immolation as a means of justifying conquest or at least to underpin their imperialistic, ethnocentric, and religious views of superiority. In fact, the same empire that regarded the prohibition of *sati* (widow sacrifice by fire or burial) as a necessity and as a reflection of enlightened ideals was itself closely intertwined with a religious world view based upon human sacrifice, that is, Christianity (Copland).⁸ The foundational human sacrifice of Christianity is that of Jesus Christ, whose death by Roman crucifixion is regarded as a singular event not requiring any additional sacrifices, as noted in the Christian New Testament (Heb. 10.1-18). Hence, imperialists espousing a Christian worldview could both recognize the validity of a human sacrifice while rejecting all other ones; Cortes, who will be treated below, corresponds to such a description and the issue is found in *Apocalypse* as well. Christian imperialists have shared with Romans both the acceptance and denunciation of human sacrifice, utilizing it as a practice that helped define “otherness” and to support the suppression of conquered peoples. As Plutarch rightly observed, this points to hypocrisy by the dominating group. There is a perceived ethnocentric and spiritual superiority that affects how people from different cultures are viewed.

There are additional examples of social groups that have espoused negative and positive views of the practice, but such perspectives are not always based upon ethnocentrism and concerns of religious ascendancy. Legislators in South Asia and Africa designated human sacrifice as an illegal practice over a hundred years ago. Some of the laws in India and West Africa are directly linked to European influence;⁹ yet, internal societal debate has occurred, such as the one that arose in India about the acceptability of the practice from the standpoint of what is considered “civilized” or religiously mandated. In the publication *India Abroad*, a popular news source claiming to be the voice of the Indian American community,¹⁰ one finds a view on *sati* that accepts its occurrence within Hinduism, but argues that Hindu society must move past the practice (Raman 17). The writer seeks to persuade the reader with the following:¹¹

Not all the apologetics in the world can erase the fact that very often in Hindu society (as elsewhere) women have been subjugated, treated shabbily and considered as inferior beings. Sati is merely one of its more atrocious and vicious expressions. Many in the course of India’s long history have condemned it: Banabhatta, Akbar, Guru Amar Das, and Ram Mohun Roy, to mention but a few.

We must resist the temptation to explain away such evils or pretend they have nothing to do with (former) Hindu world views. It is not through computers and more television

8) While it is a contentious matter, Copland argues successfully that imperialism and Christian missionary efforts were intertwined in the work conducted in India during the period in which *sati* was outlawed (1051-52).

9) On India, see elsewhere in this article; for Africa, consult Ollennu (22-23).

10) According to the publication’s webpage (www.indiaabroad.com), *India Abroad* is the most popular embodiment of the Indian-American perspective.

11) Others have regarded *sati* as archaic or uncivilized (Verma; Daiya).

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sets that we will enter the modern age, but through a bold vision that will not hesitate to condemn and correct sectarian hatreds, social injustices, and dark-age superstitions without being defensive about their religious associations, while still retaining the many grand and glorious elements in our traditions.

The British long considered such a perspective to be in line with a more “enlightened” Hindu worldview, a view that was expressed by such officials as a British Ambassador to the United States (Bryce 21) and a Governor General of India (Bentinck). Efforts were made to gain popular support in the imperial homeland for an end to *sati* sacrifice (cf. Peggs iii), as the title of a publication prepared by a former missionary to India, James Peggs, indicates: *The Suttees’ Cry to Britain; Containing Extracts from Essays Published in India and Parliamentary Papers on the Burning of Hindoo Widows: Shewing that the Rite is not an Integral Part of the Religion of the Hindoos, But a Horrid Custom, Opposed to the Institutes of Menu, And a Violation of Every Principle of Justice and Humanity: Respectfully Submitted to the Consideration of All Who Are Interested in the Welfare of British India; And Soliciting the Interference of the British Government, and of the Honourable the Court of Directors of the Honourable East India Company, To Suppress This Suicidal Practice* (1827). Within the book, one finds pro-Christian, anti-Hindu, and ethnocentric statements (22-25). The quotation just cited from *India Abroad* demonstrates a similar purpose as Pegg’s book, but it was written decades after colonial rule ended in the mid-20th century and reflects an internal debate regarding the acceptability of *sati*-sacrifice in independent India; for their part, the British did ban the practice. The post-colonial debate revolved around the case of Roop Kanwar, a young widow from Deorala, India, whose sacrifice resulted in new legislation against the practice, i.e., *The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987*. Officially, therefore, this type of human sacrifice was placed outside the boundaries of what many considered to be acceptable 20th century Indian behavior. The Women and Media Committee (“Trial by Fire”), furthermore, reports that Roop Kanwar had, in fact, been murdered and explains that a widow does not truly participate in an act of *sati*, despite any feelings that she is an autonomous actor, inasmuch as the alleged volunteer is ultimately acting out the norms of a domineering society. As journalists, the Committee members were seeking to sway public opinion on the illegitimacy of the practice. The journalists denounced *sati* based upon a 20th century understanding of gender inequity and, therefore, sought to counter patriarchal traditions. Their views correlate to those espoused by Raman above that as a society develops in modernity, it must discontinue religious practices deemed hurtful. Yet, as discussed elsewhere (Tatlock, “Debating the Legitimacy”), rather than view *sati* through the lens of what is perceived as a progressive morality, it has been argued that the ancient and foundational Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, never mandated *sati* in the first place. There is, therefore, another side to the debate that does not pit antiquity against modernity in a manner exterior to the Hindu belief system but addresses the issue of *sati* from within the core religious traditions.

In addition to *sati*, the British also focused their efforts on ending another Indian sacrificial rite regarded as inappropriate and they used the existence of human sacrifice to justify the application of force against the Kond there, as seen in Campbell’s work (105-123). The book, which was mindful of a general readership (3), bears a title that betrays its ethnocentrism: *A Personal Narrative of Thirteen Years Service amongst the Wild Tribes of Khondistan for the Suppression of Human Sacrifice*. When reflecting upon the causes for the successful suppression of the practice, which he considered to be a reason to congratulate Christendom, Campbell notes that it was not on moral grounds that the Kond capitulated but upon the firm foundation of Britain’s determination to impose the government’s will. Regarding morality, Campbell did not believe that it was the place of the government to preach the Christian Gospel, but he had a desire that it be delivered to the Kond (130-32), whom he calls “poor savages” (132). Campbell’s work can, therefore, be considered as a popular medium conveying an insular perspective on religious rites, other people groups, and militarism. As such, it fully embodies the heart of this study that human sacrifice is often found in propagandistic representations

infused with ethnocentrism, imperialism, and views of religious superiority. Christian sentiments were intertwined with British imperialism to such an extent that even if Campbell thought that his government should not proselytize, he still recognized the need to stamp out practices of human sacrifice that did not align with Christianity.

As with the Kond, the empire-builders also utilized the practice of human sacrifice to validate war against the people of Benin in West Africa at the end of the 19th century; the existence of sacrifice in Benin and British imperialism found expression in popular media of the time, such as in the *Illustrated Missionary News* (Hill).¹² An intelligence officer, who took part in the 1897 Benin Expedition, wrote an account of the conflict called *Benin: The City of Blood*, which was published to reach a general audience (Coombes 21). The first chapter of Bacon's work opens (13):

Truly has Benin been called The City of Blood. Its history is one long record of savagery of the most debased kind. In the earlier part of this century, when it was the centre of the slave trade, human suffering must here have reached its most acute form, but it is doubtful if even then the wanton sacrifice of life could have exceeded that of more recent times. Nothing that can be called religion exists within its limits, only paganism of the most unenlightened description, with certain rites and observances, which, from their ferocious cruelty, have caused Benin to be the capital of superstitious idolatry and barbarity for more than a hundred miles inland.

Bacon's derogatory description espouses an ethnocentric perspective that relegated Benin to the uncivilized world and diminished its religiosity to that which existed outside the confines of established religion. Bacon further explains that "the culmination of their magic and atrocities" was human sacrifice (14). Indeed, he later recounts that the first sign that they were getting close to the main city was that the expeditionary force encountered a human sacrifice, which, according to their guide, was performed to keep "the white man coming farther" (79). After seeing an additional victim nearby, Bacon indicates that one of the soldiers commented: "It is just about time someone did visit this place" (80). Such a statement reflects the British perspective on the need to conquer Benin, and this was in addition to the political justification that British emissaries had been killed earlier that year (cf. Bacon 15-18).¹³ The incorporation of popular forms of media afforded non-specialists with opportunities to access information with which they could form opinions about the legitimacy of British imperialism; descriptions of human sacrifice bolstered imperial efforts by validating the presence of British forces in a foreign land just like in the case of India.

A particularly egregious form of European imperialism in West Africa is represented by the transatlantic slave trade, and human sacrifice is evident in the media surrounding it. One proponent, for instance, argues for the advantages of slave trading as follows (Postlethwayt 4-5; emphasis original):

Besides, the *Negroe-Princes* in *Africa*, 'tis well known, are in perpetual War with each other; and since before they had this Method of disposing of their Prisoners of War to Christian Merchants, they were wont not only to be applied to inhuman Sacrifices, but to extream Torture and Barbarity, their Transplantation must certainly be a Melioration of their Condition; provided living in a civilized Christian Country, is better than living among Savages: Nay, if Life be preferable to Torment and cruel Death, their State cannot, with any Colour of Reason, be presumed to be worsted.

The speaker, Malachy Postlethwayt, has been described as the Royal African Company's "chief propagandist"

12) For more on the coverage provided by illustrated press, see Coombes (11-22).

13) Bacon (14-15) demonstrates the view that the lack of what was perceived as "civilization" resulted from the isolation of Benin from contact with Caucasians. This is very reminiscent of Kipling's *The White Man's Burden*.

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and “a leading apologist” on the issue of transatlantic slavery during the middle of the 18th century (Brown 88). An additional apologist writes that “the house of bondage, strictly speaking, may be called a land of freedom to them” (Norris 160) because most of the slaves from Africa would have died as prisoners of war or criminals. The latter view is from the work of Robert Norris, who is regarded as “one of the last great advocates” for British slave trading and “a man who continued to be puzzled and irritated by the abolitionists’ association of enslavement with suffering and unhappiness” (Gikandi 190). Both the views of Norris and Postlethwayt are just examples of the types of pro-slavery perspectives being promoted, and they reflect ethnocentric biases steeped in assumed cultural superiorities. Postlethwayt’s propaganda, at least, was based upon the understanding that slavery was preferable to the perceived human sacrifices being practiced in Africa, and such a justification was popular (Law 54 and n. 6). Importantly, Postlethwayt infused his argument with a strong sense of Christian superiority to contrast African human sacrifice to the benefits slaves would have in pro-Christian countries. While it is not explicit, it is possible that Postlethwayt regarded one key benefit to be access for slaves to the Christian message. Postlethwayt would most likely have praised the conversion of African slaves to Christianity, which would have potentially resulted in some exchanging one sacrificial religion for another.

As with West Africa and India, European imperialism and accounts of indigenous human sacrifice characterize early conquest in the Americas, and sources point to Christian proselytizing. In one of Cortes’ letters, for instance, he explains the steps he took to convert the Aztec by replacing their objects of veneration with those of Christianity, by cleansing temples of sacrificial blood, and by demanding the cessation of human sacrifice (Cortes 260-62). This letter, which was sent to the monarchy, received a very popular reception, as Elizabeth Wright explains: “[it] ranks as one of the first international news events of the sixteenth century that played out in the medium of print” (714). According to Smith, Spanish conquest accounts skewed representations to bring themselves glory and to justify what they did. Cortes was particularly egregious in this regard and attempted to provide a rationalization for his behavior through representing his enemies as “barbarians” requiring salvation and civilization (15). Cortes, moreover, exploited the practice of human sacrifice in a propagandistic manner in order to validate his brutality; not only was human sacrifice important as a point of justification for Spanish actions, but so, too, was the notion that Cortes was seeking to convert Amerinds to Christianity (McLynn 182). While Cortes’ intended audience may have been the monarchy in the letter referenced here, the spread of his narrative beyond the walls of the palace would have impacted more general sentiments about not only his enterprise, but also regarding people in the Americas. Europeans living so far away from the New World would have been at the mercy of propagandistic accounts because they lacked the firsthand experience to verify or to condemn narratives. For some, an account like that of Cortes would have fit into preexisting ideas about the “barbarous” nature of the “other.” British popular accounts about India and Africa would have corresponded to such ideas, too, garnering support for imperialism and for conversion to Christianity.

The era of the Spanish-American War (the turn of the 20th century), witnessed the growth of American imperialism (Elizalde 219); popular sentiments at the time linked war to human sacrifice, but in a manner unlike the examples discussed above. In her book *From Liberation to Conquest: The Visual and Popular Cultures of the Spanish-American War of 1898*, Miller discusses how Rev. Franke potentially noticed the similarities between the crucifixion of Jesus and the death of an American sailor as seen in a political cartoon called “And a Nation Mourned” by Charles Bush about the sinking of the U.S.S. *Maine* in Cuba in 1898, which Franke displayed for his congregants when speaking about the destruction. According to Miller, moreover, “Franke was among many religious leaders to connect the national mission of avenging the *Maine* and liberating Cuba to Christian values of compassion, duty, and self-sacrifice” (77). Such a conceptualization of human sacrifice may have been built upon the Christian ideal of following in the steps of the Christian messiah to give one’s

life for others (cf. Matt. 16; John 15), but it reflects a commonly held view that is still prevalent that the nation itself is worthy of human sacrifice. The dedication of book about American troops involved in the Spanish-American War and related matters states: “in memory of the heroic dead, who offered up their lives upon the altar of their country” (Prentiss iii). Similar sentiments have continued to be espoused, as reflected by the words of Abell in relation to World War II (15-16):

I looked down into the water to see the rusting hulk of the USS *Arizona*, perhaps for the first time in my adult life the thought of real human sacrifice hit me square in the face. Directly below lay the remains of more than eleven hundred US navy men who sacrificed their lives doing their duty and serving their country in the cause of human freedom around the world. Then a more staggering thought took hold of me—more than four hundred thousand Americans sacrificed their lives from 1941-45. As time passed and my inspiration grew, my thoughts about sacrifice expanded even further. What about the whole of American history? Sacrifices were made throughout our country’s history—not just during World War II.

It is important to consider that Abell does not portray the deaths of American service personnel in terms of symbolic loss, but in the sense of actual sacrificial victimization. He is not articulating a form of human sacrifice that is figurative. Abell’s message does not recognize a distinction between sacrifice, a term historically contextualized in religious rites, and tragic, heroic death that results from the sphere of secular warfare (9-10). Nevertheless, Abell, as well as American society more broadly, reflects a secularized understanding of sacrifice that has come to reside in the American psyche.

The government of the United States has worked to influence society in recognizing military loss as a secularized form of human sacrifice, a fact that is evident in war propaganda. Abell reflected upon the sacrifice of Americans during World War II. During that era, a poster was prepared that reads: “You talk of sacrifice... he *knew* the meaning of sacrifice!” “Powers of Persuasion”; emphasis original). This caption was chosen to accompany the image of a soldier hanging lifeless upon a barbed-wire fence. Behind him one can see a bright red sun, ostensibly representing Japan, the very nation responsible for the deaths of the sailors aboard the U.S.S. *Arizona* mentioned by Abell. This is merely coincidental—Abell makes no reference to the poster—but he is the product of a society steeped in the popular understanding that warfare leads to the sacrifice of Americans.

Former President Obama’s statements at a 2014 commencement ceremony of the West Point military academy further demonstrate the importance of sacrificial conceptualizations in relation to U.S. military personnel. He explains that “[i]t is a particularly useful time for America to reflect on those who’ve sacrificed so much for our freedom, a few days after Memorial Day. You are the first class to graduate since 9/11 who may not be sent into combat in Iraq or Afghanistan” (Obama). Prior to these statements, the president calls upon the audience to honor those veterans who were in attendance, as well as the military members and their families linked to deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq. President Obama’s comments about sacrifice are contextualized in a discussion of lives lost and services given on behalf of the nation. Thus, the president represents human sacrifice both as an act of dying and as an act of service. What is more, the manner in which the word “sacrifice” appears in four places in the address allows one to infer that the recent President of the United States considers sacrifice to be an act of self-denial that can, but does not always involve death. Such are the general connotations attached to the concept of sacrifice in American culture.

In the cinematic treatment that follows, American sacrificial sentiments will be discussed through the lens of *The Purge*, which provides a negative social commentary on notions of national sacrifice, imperialism, and race relations. *Apocalypto* and *The Wicker Man*, conversely, reflect ideals that bolster imperialism and

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they inherently portray the appropriateness of Christianity and its understanding of human sacrifice as the superior form of the rite. The films, then, align with or diverge from the key concepts found in the foregoing historical analysis of popular media. The major points articulated thus far revolve around the propagandistic representation of human sacrifice as an aberrant practice found among the “other” in relation to the beliefs of the group involved in conquering or dominating foreigners. Such portrayals are infused with ethnocentric, imperialistic, and religious views of perceived ascendancy that support justifications of war and suppression. There is, of course, a level of hypocrisy in these perspectives, given that there is a history of human sacrifice in the cultures denouncing the practice elsewhere. The Romans were guilty of this, as were Christian imperialists.

Human Sacrifice in Recent Fictional Propaganda: Cinematic Examples

Starting with the Americas, Yelle correctly suggests that a pro-colonial and pro-Christian view is propagated by Mel Gibson’s retelling of the demise of the Mayan civilization in his *Apocalypto* (2007). Considering both *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and *Apocalypto*, Yelle indicates that the films present a contrast between the sacrifice of Jesus and the cruel Mayan practices (83, 88). One need not view the two films in a comparative light to consider that *Apocalypto* promotes a pro-European and pro-Christian view, given the nature of the protagonist’s journey in the film. The main character, Jaguar Paw,¹⁴ is captured early in the film and taken to a Mayan city where a sacrificial scene occurs that is very reminiscent of the Aztec human sacrifices performed to rejuvenate the sun. Yet, instead of becoming a victim, Jaguar Paw escapes the sacrificial and blood-thirsty Mayans and is pursued back to his home area, where his salvation comes at a beach upon which Columbus and other Europeans are coming ashore—the Mayans are too shocked to continue pursuing their prey. Because of the interference of the Europeans, Jaguar Paw survives and is able to return to his family. Both militarism and religion are emphasized in the film through Gibson’s depiction of Columbus’ landing party to Mayan territory in 1502: in addition to armed men, a Christian monk is prominently displayed in a position behind a cross. The Europeans represent the final end of the Mayan civilization that brought about its own demise; such a conclusion is tied to the opening of the film, which displays a quotation from Durant that it is only possible to conquer a mighty civilization after that society experiences internal ruin (Gibson).

The film represents Mayan culture as particularly blood-thirsty, with the implication that such brutality was a significant factor leading to the civilization’s end; this is contrasted with the salvific sacrifice represented by the crucifixion imagery. Viewers are led to the conclusion that Christian Europeans saved the day by their arrival, which uncritically propagates the belief that western imperialism ushered in a positive chapter in Amerind history. Human sacrifice is portrayed in the film as a sign of ruinous Mayan behavior that is juxtaposed with the heroic representation of Christianity. Thus, Yelle is right in the assessment that Gibson places Christian human sacrifice in stark contrast to Mayan practices, but Freidel accuses Gibson of misrepresenting the antagonists in the film by his portrayal of the urban Maya as exhibiting a lust for blood. Freidel indicates, for instance, that large-scale human sacrifice was not typical and that non-elites were atypical victims in Mayan society (38-40). Freidel explains, moreover, that “[t]he purely savage killing fields of *Apocalypto* are alien to the Maya world” (40). One critic goes so far as to characterize the film as having a thin veneer of authenticity, while resurrecting many cinematic clichés about earlier societies, such as limiting “primitive” people to the role of “savage barbarian” or “noble savage” (Richardson 226-27).¹⁵ For an unsuspecting audience, the film bolsters the broader narrative that diminishes the rights of Amerinds. Contemporary society in the United States is still deeply entrenched in a paradigm that relegates Amerinds to the displaced status of the “other.”

The types of ethnocentrism, imperialism, and religious superiority found in the historical examples

14) Jaguar Paw is played by Rudy Youngblood, an actor of Amerind descent (“Rudy Youngblood”).

15) Given this article’s emphasis on imperialism, the reader may find Richardson’s assessment of *Apocalypto*’s mental imperialism worthy of consideration (227-228).

discussed above correlate well with Gibson's *Apocalypto*. Cortes' propaganda associated with Spanish interests in the Americas is not that different from the film, for instance, in its negative assessment of Amerinds and the positive depiction of Christianity. For both Cortes and Gibson, Christianity was triumphant. That religion is not overtly victorious in the 1973 version of *The Wicker Man*, but Christianity ultimately appears in a positive light. The film is set on a Scottish island, and the Christian figure, a police officer named Sergeant Howie, who is sacrificed at the culmination of the film, has a faith infused with colonial aspirations for the island to fall under mainland authority. When Howie is burned alive by the islanders, he spends his final moments preaching, singing, and praying (M. Wright 80, 83-84, 92). The victim's adherence to a high-church-like Christianity can be regarded as strengthening the view that the film purposefully presents "parallels between the islanders' mystical understanding of Howie's body and blood as a sacrifice on their behalf, and his faith in Jesus' atoning death" (M. Wright 84; emphasis original). Even if such parallels are purposeful, the Christian victim is still conquered. The film, which uses Celtic religiosity like the wicker man motif, is contextualized in the era when Celtic heritage started to be a point of fascination in contemporary society (M. Wright 92-93).¹⁶ Koven (2, 4, 9-10) analyzes the trajectory that led from Caesar's representation of the Celts through James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*) to *The Wicker Man* movie, and observes that the fictional Celtic world of the film, which was intended to be a true reflection of past paganism, influenced modern Pagans, who have sought to reconstruct that world at the Burning Man and Wickerman festivals. The former festival, which is based on ten core principles,¹⁷ has grown from very humble beginnings in 1986 to an event drawing in nearly 70,000 participants in 2015 (Burning Man, "Timeline"); the latter, which is a musical event that has been held about half as many times, began in 2001 and is situated in Scotland ("Brief History"), thereby giving it a stronger connection to the film than the other festival. Koven suggests, moreover, that the film engenders a colonialist perspective of the "other," and that the creators did not critically read their source material, namely, Frazer, as well as his use of Caesar, when they sought to re-create an authentic Celtic environment (2, 4, 9-10). Melanie Wright discusses, but was not convinced by the perspective that the movie reflects Scottish nationalism (93);¹⁸ nevertheless, it can be said that the protagonist has a colonizing faith in the film and that "[w]hen he speaks of Scotland as a 'Christian country' this is always in the context of a desire to assert the authority of the mainland over the island community" (84). Because Howie dies as a pagan sacrifice, *The Wicker Man* superficially promotes a perceived Celtic religion over Christianity, but the victim's faith leaves a more positive impression upon the viewer than what comes across as the sordid and murderous beliefs of the islanders. Howie models the crucified Jesus by his piety in the face of wrongful assault. Given that his faith is imperialistic, his death punctuates the need for outside interference to tame the island. *The Wicker Man*, therefore, lines up with the views of British conquerors like Campbell and Bacon, who perceived of a need for British intervention in the face of what were viewed as nefarious human sacrifices. For the British Empire at the time, such sacrifices were positioned in contrast to Christian ideals. The film's indiscriminate use of Caesar's propagandistic account of Celtic sacrifice may have encouraged the negative representations of the islanders and, thereby, unwittingly endorsed Roman ethnocentrism, too.

The Purge (2013) demonstrates cultural divides and propagandistic aims reflected in popular expressions of human sacrifice, but in ways dissimilar to the other films; it also shows the power of blood-lust

16) On colonialism and *The Wicker Man*, see Koven (9).

17) The principles are radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy. These concepts are intended to reflect the culture of Burning Man as it has matured over the years, rather than serving as mandates for practice (Burning Man, "Ten Principles").

18) Whether or not Scottish nationalism was intentionally addressed in *The Wicker Man* is debatable, but the film apparently struck a nationalistic chord for the creator of *Darklands* (1996). According to Martin-Jones, *Darklands* is an updated version of *The Wicker Man* that addresses Welsh independence. Martin-Jones, moreover, comments that horror movies serve as able conduits for addressing nationalistic interests in peripheral areas with Celtic heritage during the process of devolution (128).

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in a contemporary audience and speaks to current nationalistic sentiments. In this instance, the blood-thirsty desires of movie-goers gave the *The Purge* a \$36.4 million successful first weekend, earning it the spotlight as the highest producing opening for a rated-R horror movie in history, with the exception of horror remakes or sequels (Mendelson). The success of its opening weekend reflects a current fascination with blood, gore, alternative realities, and non-conforming religiosity; recently Universal Orlando staged, but quickly pulled, a human sacrifice re-enactment as part of its Halloween Horror Nights (Kubersky). This likely disappointed some attendees in this era of mass desensitization to violence. American culture is constantly bombarded by violent imagery in news reports about real events, but fictional violence dominates the entertainment industry from life-like simulated killings in popular games like *Call of Duty* to major film franchises like *The Purge*, just released its fourth installment about how it all began. It is not coincidental that the movie opened on July 4, a day to celebrate patriotism (“The First Purge”).

The Purge is about maintaining law and order by providing a release for societal hostilities. The film is set in a United States of America in which patriotism has become the new religion and members of society are given one night a year to do anything they want without fear of judicial restraint or accountability. The intention is to provide an outlet for pent-up aggression so that it does not spill out elsewhere. Those familiar with sacrificial theory might recognize such a notion as reflected in the writings of Girard, who proposed that human sacrifice serves as a social catharsis by which members of a group vent their wrath upon a human scapegoat. Girard is known for his focus on the Greek ritual participant called the *pharmakos* (a scapegoat figure), who was taken around a city to absorb societal ills before being driven out to carry the problems away (Girard). Despite the correlation, DeMonaco did not draw the concept from Girard; instead, the idea came from his wife, who, in exasperation from experiencing road rage commented that individuals should be allowed to commit one free murder per year (Blumhouse Productions). One of the near victims of murder or sacrifice in *The Purge* is an African-American man, who is hunted by a group of wealthy, white young adults. Concerning the topics of ethnocentrism/racism and propaganda, interviews with the lead actor, Ethan Hawke, reveal that the propagandistic goal of the film was to promote anti-violence in a gun-toting American culture consumed with violence and the right of self-protection that can lead to the wrongful death of minorities. Hawke explicitly noted that audience members who fail to recognize the parallels between the hunting of an African-American man in a gated neighborhood and the then recent slaying of Trayvon Martin in Florida miss out on the primary message of the film (Labrecque; Esquivel). Thus, *The Purge* utilizes the practice of human sacrifice to spark an internal debate about racial profiling, as well as the prevalence of gun violence in the United States. Through human sacrifice, the film attempts to address the issue of “othering” to demonstrate the fallacious and injurious nature of categorizing societal members based upon skin tone. In attempting to shift societal views, *The Purge* corresponds, in part, to the deliberations within Indian society concerning the continuation of *sati*-sacrifice; but the film is unlike the propagandistic accounts of the British, who used guns to suppress sacrifice and were deeply entrenched in the imperialistic enterprise. *The Purge* was created to entertain, make money, and to provide some social commentary, but there is a more subtle message in the film that was not noted by Hawke as the primary theme.

The Purge provides a secondary critique of modern America by its negative portrayal of a very popular conceptualization of human sacrifice, that is, losing one’s life for nationalism. Near the end of the film, the neighbors of the family who provide safe-haven against the mob of vicious youths attempt to perform a patriotic sacrificial rite, and this is portrayed unfavorably. *The Purge* provides a commentary on the legitimacy of sacrificing U.S. citizens for nationalistic interests; therefore, viewers can perceive the film as a critique not only of gun violence against minorities living in the United States, but also of American sponsored violence in foreign wars. The film came to screens in this era of extensive American involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts that can be viewed as imperialistic. In this way, *The Purge* could be seen as unlike *Apocalypto* and *The*

Wicker Man by reflecting negatively upon imperialism. The movie also contrasts perspectives espoused, for instance, during the era of the Spanish-American war that the nation is worthy of human sacrifice.

Concluding Remarks

Human sacrifice, as this study demonstrates, serves as an important subject for social commentary, be it directed at contemporary neighbors, past societies, or one's own social group. It is a polarizing topic used to demarcate cultural insiders from "barbarous" outsiders. Such demarcations function both contemporarily and chronologically, given that cultural groups distinguish themselves from their neighbors by citing abhorrent foreign practices and from their pasts by denouncing the impropriety of their ancestors. Sacrificial imagery is, therefore, steeped in ethnocentric conceptualizations that exist along the etic/emic dynamic to characterize the "other" as complicit in immoral, irreligious, or brutal rites, even if that "other" corresponds to one's ancestors. For imperialistic enterprises, human sacrifice inhabits the category of those deplorable practices that deserve foreign intervention and validate conquest. From the standpoint of propaganda, human sacrifice can be used to advance such political goals, as well as to promote ethnocentric ideals and to further religious agendas. In short, human sacrifice in popular material moves beyond the rite's ability to feed curiosities by furthering propagandistic aims both in historical and fictional settings. The propagandistic aims associated with domination in the Americas, West Africa, and India particularly demonstrate imperialism infused with ethnocentric and religious views of cultural superiority especially related to Christianity, a faith built upon a human sacrifice but a tradition that does not accept the legitimacy of such immolation in other religions. Human sacrifice is relegated to the realm of the irreligious or unenlightened, and it serves as a basis for justifying conquest. If a person of the indigenous culture holds an anti-human sacrifice view, then that individual can be evaluated by the conquerors as holding to an enlightened perspective. Domination of the "other" is not solely connected to colonial expansion, however, as the transatlantic slave trade evinces. A propagandist could go so far as to promote the practice of slavery as a means of rescuing people from human sacrifice. The additional advantage, so it was argued, was that the enslaved could inhabit land regarded as culturally and religiously superior, i.e., Christian lands. From the standpoint of nationalism, human sacrifice is able not only to motivate action against other societies based upon a negative representation of human sacrifice as an external threat to be stamped out, but it can also inspire the use of armed force based upon a positive portrayal of it as an internal ideal to be emulated for the sake of nationalism. Indeed, any form of human sacrifice would be viewed in a positive light by those recognizing its legitimacy. Thus, one person's pious act can be denounced by another as an abomination. Such a distinction between the justified and unjustified loss of human life normally falls along the etic/emic line, in which those from within tend to promote the practice in contrast to the denunciations of outsiders.

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