The Scapegoat Mechanism in Southeast Asian Ritual, Myth, and Politics

From Mead and Bateson's *Trance and Dance in Bali* to Massacres in the Philippines and Indonesia

Kahlil Corazo

Trance and Dance in Bali is a 20-minute black-and-white film by anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson released in 1951. The film uses footage from Mead and Bateson's visual ethnography work in Bali shot in the 1930s, and shows a traditional Balinese ritual performance depicting the mythical creatures Rangda and Barong. Translating Balinese mythology for Western viewers, Mead presents Rangda as a witch and Barong as a dragon. Dancers in the play enter a trance state and stab themselves with kris knives but remain uninjured. The film concludes with some footage taken after the play, where a fowl is sacrificed as part of the process of exiting the trance state.

I watched *Trance and Dance in Bali* after a year of studying and writing about René Girard's scapegoat mechanism. It was uncanny how well this Balinese play fit Girard's theory, so much so that I thought that there must be an analysis of it by Girard or a Girard scholar. I found none. Although the film had been subject to various analyses and critiques, the Girardian angle remains unexplored.[1]

This paper aims to fill that gap by examining *Trance and Dance in Bali* through the lens of Girard's scapegoat mechanism. Furthermore, this analysis will explore how the scapegoat mechanism can shed light on historical and contemporary collective violence in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines and Indonesia.[2] First, however, let me lay the groundwork by presenting the ubiquity of ritual sacrifice, various explanations for this phenomenon, and the similarities of myths across the world.

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[1] Critiques and analyses tend to be on the scholarly approach of Mead and Bateson, rather than the myth depicted by the dance in the film. E.g., Jacknis, "Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in Bali," 862-885, provides a historical overview of their project and discusses issues of objectivity in their visual records. Tobing Rony, "The Photogenic Cannot Be Tamed," 95-116, critiques their anthropological methods and representation of Balinese culture, highlighting issues of colonialism, objectification, and stereotyping.

[2] Thanks to Dr. Cleo Kearns, Dr. Martha Reineke, and Dr. Raymond Albert Ng for providing feedback to earlier versions of this paper.

Your Ancestors and Mine Practiced Ritual Sacrifice. Why?

As late as the 1960s, anthropologists have recorded ritual human sacrifice among upland communities in the Philippines that had continued to escape modernity.[3] For instance, on the first page of Jules de Raedt's *Kalinga Sacrifice* (1989), we read,

> The *sagang* is a human sacrifice, performed for general welfare, and occasionally for the curing of the insane. Insanity is viewed as the gravest of illnesses, and the sacrifice performed for it requires a human head. Animal sacrifices are an extension of human sacrifices, and are performed in that context.

Human sacrifice is not unique to these communities. In fact, it appears to be found all over the world. The Torah mentions Abraham, who attempted to sacrifice his son.[4] God's command to substitute a ram for the sacrifice has been interpreted as a transition from human to animal sacrifice among the ancestors of the Jews.[5] In 10th-century Europe, Ahmad ibn Fadlan witnessed a Viking chieftain's funeral that included the sacrifice of a slave girl to join her master in death.[6] The most well-known record of human sacrifice is probably that of the Aztecs in the 16th century. Less well-known are mentions of human sacrifice in the records of anthropologists in the early years of the discipline (20th century), when cultures yet to be touched by the West were first studied systematically and professionally (as compared to the writings of hobbyist missionaries and colonial officials). For instance, we read in Bronisław Malinowski's 1922 book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*,

> For woe to the canoe caught by the giant *kwita*! It would be held fast, unable to move for days, till the crew, dying of hunger and thirst, would decide to sacrifice one of the small boys of their number. Adorned with valuables, he would be thrown overboard, and then the *kwita*, satisfied, would let go its hold of the canoe, and set it free. Once a native, asked why a grown-up would not be

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[3] For a historical perspective on ritual human sacrifice among various Philippine groups, see Narciso C. Tan, *Púgot: Head Taking, Ritual Cannibalism, and Human Sacrifice in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Vibal Foundation, 2021). Tan's work primarily discusses these practices in pre-colonial and early colonial contexts.

[4] The Jerusalem Bible, Gen 22:1-19.

[5] This common interpretation has been challenged by scholars like Jon D. Levenson, who argues against reading the Akedah (Genesis 22) as a story meant to explain the origins of animal sacrifice replacing human sacrifice. Levenson suggests that early Israelite attitudes toward child sacrifice were more complex. See Levenson, Jon D. *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 126.

[6] Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, "The Rus," in *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler from Baghdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard N. Frye (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005), 63-71.

> sacrificed on such an occasion, gave me the answer: “A grown-up man would not like it; a boy has got no mind. We take him by force and throw him to the *kwita*.”[7]

Why is human sacrifice found in cultures across the world? If we broaden ritual sacrifice to include non-human victims, the practice becomes a cultural universal, like song and dance. Why would all pre-modern cultures end up with the same gruesome practice along with singing and dancing?

Cleo Kearns, in the first chapter of her book, *The Virgin Mary, Monotheism and Sacrifice* (2009), provides an overview of explanations of sacrifice. She chose eleven theorists starting from Émile Durkheim (1858 - 1917) to contemporary feminist scholars Julia Kristeva and Abdellah Hammoudi. Below is a table that summarizes her interpretation of each theory.[8]

[7] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge, 2005), 179-180.
[8] I used A.I. to summarize each theory and search for the dates of births and deaths of each theorist.

Theorist	Explanation of Sacrifice
Émile Durkheim (1858 - 1917)	Sacrifice as a way of affirming the collective consciousness and social solidarity. Emphasis on the integrative and regenerative functions of sacrifice.
Henri Hubert (1872 - 1927) and Marcel Mauss (1872 - 1950)	Sacrifice as a means of communication between the sacred and profane realms. Emphasis on the social functions of sacrifice, such as establishing hierarchies and reinforcing collective representations.
Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939)	Sacrifice as a symbolic reenactment of the primal patricide and the resolution of Oedipal conflicts. Emphasis on the psychological origins and meanings of sacrifice.
Jacques Lacan (1901 - 1981)	Sacrifice as a means of navigating the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic order. Emphasis on the role of signifiers, substitution, and the inscription of the subject into language and culture.
Walter Burkert (1931 - 2015)	Sacrifice as originating in the evolutionary history of hunting and the need to manage guilt and aggression. Emphasis on the psychological and social functions of sacrifice, such as the symbolic reenactment of the primal hunt.
René Girard (1923 - 2015)	Sacrifice as a means of managing mimetic violence and social conflict through the scapegoat mechanism. Emphasis on the substitutive and cathartic functions of the sacrificial victim.
Maurice Bloch (1939 -)	Sacrifice as a means of mediating between the "vital" and "transcendental" aspects of human existence. Emphasis on the symbolic and transformative dimensions of sacrifice.
Georges Bataille (1897 - 1962)	Sacrifice as a transgressive act that challenges the boundaries of the profane world and affirms the continuity of life and death. Emphasis on the psychological and existential meanings of sacrifice.
Nancy Jay (1929 - 1991)	Sacrifice as a means of establishing and maintaining patriarchal social structures and gender hierarchies. Emphasis on the role of sacrifice in reproducing the patriline and asserting paternal authority.
Julia Kristeva (1941 -)	Sacrifice as involving a 'thetic cut' that separates the symbolic from the abject. Emphasis on the role of the maternal in sacrifice and religious symbolism, particularly in relation to the figure of Mary in Christianity.
Abdellah Hammoudi (1945 -)	Analysis of the gender dynamics and symbolic elements of sacrificial rituals in Islamic contexts. Emphasis on the role of sacrifice in reproducing gender roles and power relations.

Let me propose a categorization of these theories:

- **Theories of origin**: explanations of why the practice of sacrifice emerged in societies
- **Theories of function**: explanations of why sacrifice continue to be practiced in societies

- **Theories of meaning**: explanations—or more accurately, descriptions—of why sacrifice is practiced from the perspective of those performing the sacrifice

This division simplifies the task of answering why we find ritual sacrifice everywhere. While theories of function and meaning attempt to explain why the practice of sacrifice persists within specific cultures, only theories of origin can explain the emergence of ritual sacrifice across human cultures. There are only three theories of origin in this list: Freud's, Burkert's, and Girard's. Among these three, Girard's theory explains best the origin of the myth and sacrifice in *Trance and Dance in Bali*. (This article does not aim to judge which of these theories is best supported by the anthropological and historical record. It only points out how one myth fits one theory quite well.)

Similar to ritual sacrifice, it turns out that myths from all over the world have similar elements. This is notable because prior to the modern era, there was no communication across most cultures. Even if humans have a common origin, why would similar elements persist across millennia of isolation?

René Girard's theory explains both the ubiquity of ritual sacrifice and the similarities of myths, particularly the elements of myths connected to sacrifice. Girard's explanation is especially applicable to *Trance and Dance in Bali*. Let's go through key scenes of the film before analyzing it through a Girardian lens. If you'd like to watch it, you can easily find the film through an internet search.

Trance and Dance in Bali

Here is the text that rolls at the beginning of the film. I'm highlighting the section which mentions how the king's emissary transforms into a dragon, since this is the aspect of the myth I will be connecting to political violence in present-day Philippines and Indonesia.

> *In this play, the witch, angered by the king's refusal to marry her daughter, sends forth her disciples to spread the plague. The villagers wander the roads, trying to escape the plague. There is a struggle between the witch, in masked supernatural form, and* ***the emissary of the king, who fails to kill her and is transformed into a dragon.*** *The followers of the dragon are thrown into a deep trance by the witch, revived by the dragon into a somnambulistic state, and turn their krisses violently against themselves. The performance ends with ceremonies for bringing the actors out of trance.*

The play starts by introducing the witch and her disciples. Mead tells us of the motivation behind their eventual crimes. She narrates: "Beside her is her daughter, who

had been rejected by the king of the country. In revenge for the slight of her daughter, she is now training her little novices to spread pestilence and death."

timestamp: 3:02

The play then depicts the suffering of the victims of the witch. Mead continues: "The next scene shows a pregnant woman among a group of people who have fled their plague-stricken village to wander the roads."

timestamp: 4:04

Mead: "This is the birth scene, where the pregnant woman, played by a man, gives birth to a child while the witches lurk about to steal the newborn child." The villagers help the woman give birth. The witch (who wears a mask and white dreadlocks) and a witch child (to her right) await the birth.

4:08

Mead: "A doll, which is stolen by the witch child, tossed in the air, killed, and returned dead to its mourning relatives. The villagers mourn for the dead child, putting on a theatrical display of grief."

4:38

Mead: "The witches, witch child, and witch tease the mortals, to whom they are not yet quite visible... As they become visible, the mortals chase the witches... The witch child is caught and held by the hair, a demeaning gesture."

5:08

The next scene is at the temple gate. An emissary of the king attempts to kill the witch, but he fails. The witch wears a "white cloth in which a mother carries her baby." The girls who were trained by the witch now put on their masks. Mead: "These are the frightening witches into which the beautiful little girls of the ballet have been transformed." Like their leader, they also wear dreadlocks and sagging breasts.

6:34

The emissary then transforms into the dragon. Mead: "Here is the dragon arrived to confront her. As she represents death, he represents life. And they have a long altercation in ancient ecclesiastical Javanese while she holds him by his beard and scolds him."

7:07

The next scene shows a group of young men brandishing kris knives. They repeatedly attempt to kill the witch. They stab the witch, fail to kill her, and collapse. The fallen men go into a trance.

8:02

The dragon appears again and revives the men. Mead notes that it is followed by its "priest, who sprinkles the holy water over them." The men go into what Mead describes as a somnambulistic state. They continue dancing with their krisses.

10:08

A group of women, also wielding kris knives and performing the same dance, then arrive. Mead: "At a scream given by one of their number, they suddenly go into trance seizures... and with loosened hair, turn their krisses against themselves." The men likewise point their knives to themselves. Mead spends several minutes showing and commenting on the trance.

11:26

The film then cuts into a wall of text, similar to the introduction. It reads:

> *The theatrical part of the performance is over, as one by one, the trancers have fallen into rigid, limp or convulsive states of unconsciousness and been carried into the open temple courtyard, where they will be brought out of trance.*

15:26

After the end of the play, the men who played the witch and the dragon—also in a trance state—perform a sacrifice. Mead: "A chicken is brought, which is to be offered, by the priest of the dragon." The man who bites off the head of the chicken was the one who played the witch. He does so while in a state of trance. After the sacrifice, we are shown some footage as its performers gradually recover from their trance.

19:02

Mead closes the film with this interpretation: "The play is over, but it will begin again and again as the Balinese reenact the struggle between fear and death on the one hand and life-protecting ritual on the other."

Witches

Girard points out that myths related to sacrifice tend to be set during a crisis in society. In the first chapters of his 1982 book *The Scapegoat*, Girard uses text from Guillaume de Machaut, a 14th-century French poet and composer, to unveil the pattern he sees across records of times of crisis, especially of plagues. He saw this pattern in myths and works of literature.

> *Descriptions of these events are all alike. Some of them, especially descriptions of the plague, are found in our greatest writers. We read them in Thucydides and Sophocles, in Lucretius, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Defoe, Thomas Mann,*

> *Antonin Artaud, and many others. Some of them are also written by individuals with no literary pretensions, and there is never any great difference.*[9]

Early in *The Scapegoat*, which he says is about "collective persecutions and their resonances," Girard writes,

> *By collective persecutions I mean acts of violence committed directly by a mob of murderers such as the persecution of the Jews during the Black Death. By collective resonances of persecutions I mean acts of violence, such as witch-hunts, that are legal in form but stimulated by the extremes of public opinion [...] The persecutions in which we are interested generally take place in times of crisis, which weaken normal institutions and favor mob formation.*[10]

Let's look at the Balinese play as a Girardian persecution text.

Through this lens, the witches in this play can be seen as depictions of scapegoats, as we are now convinced their counterparts were in the witch hunts of pre-modern Europe and America. They were blamed for the plague and murdered for it. Since the tellers of myths are the murderers and their descendants, the story tends to accrue justifications for their murder.

The opening scene of the play establishes the guilt of the witches. They are given a motivation: vengeance for the daughter's rejection by the king. Like the Jews in Guillaume de Machaut's text they are also given magical powers. The European Jews can poison an entire town, while the Balinese witches can cause a plague.

The persecution is further justified by the gravity of their crimes. This is one pattern that Girard noticed among these texts:

> *First there are violent crimes which choose as object those people whom it is most criminal to attack, either in the absolute sense or in reference to the individual committing the act: a king, a father, the symbol of supreme authority, and in biblical and modern societies the weakest and most defenseless, especially young children.*[11]

Two atrocities are attributed to the witches. They plot vengeance against the king and they kill a newborn baby.

Why is the witch accompanied by apprentices and a witch child, all of whom are also shown to commit crimes against the villagers? At some point, they become visible or

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[9] René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. Kindle edition, loc. 225.
[10] Ibid., Kindle loc. 216.
[11] Ibid., Kindle loc. 265.

transform into witches. Through a Girardian lens, this inclusion of apprentices and a child among the witches' ranks serves as a justification for the mob's indiscriminate scapegoating and violence, not just against old women, but also against young girls and children.

Dragons

According to Girard, our modern tendency to side with victims of persecution (e.g., witches) originates from the perspective that stems from the sacred scriptures of the Jews and the Christians.[12] This cultural innovation has now spread all over the world through "Western" modernity and globalization. Today, it might seem like this mindset is innate to humanity. Yet, if we look at the historical and anthropological record, we will see that the default mindset is to side with the strong and to frame myths from their perspective. The murder of the victim, like the stabbing of the Balinese witch, is always justified in sacrificial myths. In contrast, we are shown the viewpoint of the victim in Jewish sacred text. For instance, we meet Abel, the innocent victim of his brother Cain; Joseph ("the dreamer"), the innocent victim of his brothers' envy; and Uriah, the innocent victim of King David's twisted desire. In the Christian bible, we meet Jesus of Nazareth, the innocent victim sacrificed to keep the peace. Let's use this lens to compare dragons.

The legend of St. George depicts a dragon well-known in Christian mythology. In this tale, the dragon terrorizes a town, demanding sacrifices. Just as the town is about to offer up a princess, St. George, a traveling knight, arrives and intervenes. He slays the dragon, leading the townspeople to embrace Christianity.[13]

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[12] In a lecture, Girard says, "I don't not want to privilege absolutely the Bible," and goes on to explain how the unveiling of the scapegoat mechanism can also be found in ancient Indian texts, and that one can find an "anti-sacrificial thrust" in the Upanishads, "where sacrifice is regarded as murder." René Girard, "An Introduction to Mimetic Theory - 2002," audio podcast episode, *Violence & The Sacred*, Cornerstone Forum, August 5, 2021, 1:09:46, https://www.cornerstone-forum.org/podcast.

[13] Notably, the myth of the dragon of Mount Kanlaon in the Philippines follows the same pattern as the myth of St. George and resonates with Girard's comment on the Indian unveiling of the scapegoat mechanism referenced in the footnote above. The myth relays how the dragon of Kanlaon required a virgin at least once a year. At some point, the village ran out of slave girls, so a girl of noble blood had to be chosen. A youth from neighboring India "who seemed like a demigod" came to the rescue and slew the dragon. The Indian demigod then "married the princess, who became the mother of a new generation." Damiana L. Eugenio, *Philippine Folk Literature: The Myths*, 2nd ed. (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2018), 191.

Compare this to the dragon in the Balinese play, Barong.[14] It is the enemy of the evil witch, Rangda.[15] To Mead, Barong represents life. In the play, we see it revive the mob that attempts to kill Rangda. The holy water of Barong's priest brings the knife-wielding mob into a trance state and they continue with their attempts to kill Rangda.

St. George's dragon and Barong are located by their storytellers on opposite ends of the moral spectrum, but they converge in their demand for sacrifice. From a Girardian perspective, these creatures embody the scapegoat mechanism in mythological form. The difference is that the Balinese play is told by what Girard calls "naive persecutors" who "are unaware of what they are doing. Their conscience is too good to deceive their readers systematically, and they present things as they see them."[16] In the Balinese play, the scapegoat mechanism remains unveiled and the storytellers have no doubt about the witch's guilt.[17]

Dragons, serpents, and other supernatural creatures that demand sacrifice appear in myths all over the world because the scapegoat mechanism was the solution that all surviving societies found to the new dangers brought about by emerging cognitive abilities during what Girard calls the process of "hominization." Girard presents mimetic rivalry as one consequence of these cognitive abilities. In his model, mimetic rivalry stems from mimetic desire.

Girard observes how humans are the most mimetic of creatures. This leads us to desire people or things that can only belong to one or a few. This love triangle leads to an inevitable conflict between rivals. The violence between rivals spreads throughout society through mimesis as well. Murder is repaid with murder in an endless cycle of vengeance.

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[14] Purwanto, in "Mysticism of Barong and Rangda in Hindu Religion," explains how Barong embodies the masculine aspect of divine duality in Balinese Hinduism. Derived from the Old Javanese word for "bear," Barong appears most commonly as a lion-like figure representing a manifestation of Lord Shiva, particularly in his aspect as Shiva Pasupati. This sacred symbol serves as a protective force against evil, featuring prominently in religious ceremonies and cultural performances where it ranges from sacred to secular contexts. See Vol. 3 No. 2 Oct. 2019: 258-283.

[15] Ibid. explains how Rangda embodies the feminine aspect of divine duality in Balinese Hinduism. Derived from the Old Javanese word for "widow," Rangda appears as a fearsome figure with long hair and tongue, representing a manifestation of Durga or Shakti. This sacred symbol embodies both destructive and protective powers, featuring prominently in religious ceremonies and cultural performances where it often appears alongside Barong to represent the balance of cosmic forces.

[16] René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, Kindle loc. 162.

[17] If we step outside a strictly Girardian interpretation, and anticipate the next section, the difference between the two myths can also be rooted in the location of state power (the king), and therefore state propaganda. The figure of the king as scapegoat can be seen in mythology (Oedipus is Girard's favorite example) as well as in the anthropological record (e.g., see Sahlins and Graeber's *On Kings*). The story of St. George is an example of this situation. The dragon is not satisfied with the sacrifice of villagers, and the king's daughter, the princess, is the one next in line for the offering. In contrast, Barong is a transformation of the king's emissary and Rangda is guilty of plotting vengeance against the king.

Girard presents the scapegoat mechanism as the instinct that evolved among human societies that survived this inevitable crisis: those that did not had gone extinct. As chaos threatens to destroy society, the mob instinctively picks an individual or a subgroup to blame for the crisis. The cycle of vengeance ends by directing all the violence towards these scapegoats. Society is united in its collective murder. No one is left among the scapegoats to take vengeance, so the cycle ends.

This crisis and its violent resolution happened countless times in the hidden past of all societies that survive today (recall how Rangda never dies despite the repeated stabbing). The peace that resulted from this violence felt magical, so it became ritualized. Most societies substituted the sacrifice of humans with animals. Not all, though. This common origin created the similarities of myths of cultures as geographically dispersed as Bali and Europe. To Girard, this common origin of societies explains the universality of sacrifice and its relation to the sacred. The Balinese play speaks of something true: the dragon represents life, a life purchased with the collective murder of the scapegoat.

The Ultimate Craft of Statesmanship

This paper used the scapegoat mechanism as a lens to analyze the Barong-Rangda dance in Mead and Bateson's film. Conversely, the Balinese myth could enrich our understanding of the scapegoat mechanism. Girard used written texts—from novels to myths to ethnographies—to formulate his theories. The medium limits the kinds of messages that can be transmitted in the telephone game that cultures play across millennia. For instance, Girard theorizes a time of chaos that results from a contagion of mimetic rivalry and violence, which triggers the scapegoat mechanism. But what does this actually look like? Though still metaphorical, the Balinese dancers stabbing the witch and themselves might be a more "high-definition" representation of this event compared to words on paper. Similarly, the essential role of trance in this Balinese persecution text might be a clearer representation of the mental state of the perpetrators of the collective murder.

I'm pointing out this potential contribution by *Trance and Dance in Bali* to studies of Girard's ideas since I wrote this paper for a Girard-focused publication. However, I belong to a local community of scholars, and while resonances between Girard's theory and an ethnographic film from 1930s' Bali is interesting, this paper feels incomplete unless I connect it to the concerns of this academic community. I can hear them in my head reacting with "so what?" to the analysis above. So let me close by applying the theorizing we just did on questions relevant to this little corner of Philippine academia I'm most familiar with.

Girard's method is consistent with what Claude Lévi-Strauss proposed in the chapter "The Structural Study of Myth" in his 1958 book *Structural Anthropology*. Like Lévi-Strauss, Girard assumes that texts are distorted as they are passed down across millennia orally or in writing. However, if you compare many of these distorted texts, you could see a pattern that tells you of their common origin. From this perspective, Mead and Bateson's translation of Barong and Rangda as dragon and witch was appropriate. I highlight this because contemporary anthropology tends to develop semiotic explanations, or "theories of meaning" in the categorization above, and translations such as these can be seen as problematic, as they may oversimplify complex cultural concepts by filtering them through a modern, Western perspective, potentially obscuring their original significance and context. However, if there exists common psychological tendencies among all humans, especially when operating as a group, then seeking patterns across cultures is not only justified but precisely the method for developing theories of human behavior. And while critics have pointed out various issues with Mead and Bateson's film,[18] these issues can be viewed as merely additional layers of distortion that do not negate the underlying patterns revealed in the ritual.

To a contemporary Filipino anthropologist, this might sound like an epistemology stuck in the mid-20th century. I'm going by personal experience as I make these observations, but anthropological work in the Philippines appears to be primarily focused on ethnographies of marginalized communities, often in service of social justice and environmental activism. For instance, studies of indigenous peoples[19] or the urban poor through the lens of political, economic, or cultural oppression. The Marxian and postcolonial nationalist roots of contemporary Filipino anthropology seem to be widely acknowledged.

For those who view scholarship as inherently political, I propose that even if you value scholarly work primarily for its role in changing society, theories that seek to uncover universal patterns in collective human behavior can still contribute to transformative social change. I see this as analogous to how advancements in basic science unlock new possibilities for technological innovation. (Girard, notably, considered himself "an atheist in politics"[20])

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[18] See Jacknis, "Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in Bali," 862-885 and Tobing Rony, "The Photogenic Cannot Be Tamed," 95-116.

[19] In the Philippine context, the term "indigenous" typically refers to communities that have maintained distinct cultural traditions and often occupy ancestral domains, setting them apart from the majority lowland Christian population. See Oona Paredes, "Indigenous vs. Native: Negotiating the Place of Lumads in the Bangsamoro Homeland," *Asian Ethnicity* 16, no. 2 (2015): 166-185.

[20] Luke Burgis, "Culture War as Imitation Game: The timeliness of René Girard's case against idolizing politics," *The New Atlantis*, Summer 2023, https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/culture-war-as-imitation-game.

Consider, for instance, the killing of tens of thousands of *sangleys* (economic migrants from China) in Manila in 1603, 1639, and 1662.[21] “Historians have struggled to adequately explain this cycle of massacres and its disappearance,” notes Kristie Flannery in *Piracy and the Making of the Spanish Pacific World* (2024).[22] Flannery then offers piracy as an explanation. While maritime threats and racial antagonism between the Spanish rulers and the immigrant sangleys may explain the motivation behind these mass murders, it does not explain how these pogroms were activated. One, I imagine, does not simply command his troops to commit genocide, and expect them to suddenly transform into mass-murdering monsters. The similarity between the 17th century sangley massacres to 20th century massacres in Indonesia—most recently in 1998 and most brutally in 1965—underscore how collective murder is not just a concern of historians but of scholars of contemporary culture, including those that utilize scholarship to change the world.

In the Balinese play, the king’s emissary transforms into the dragon. Later, the dragon’s disciples collectively stab the witch. The king’s weaponization of the dragon against the scapegoat sounds like a mythological expression of the role of ritual sacrifice in the maintenance of power among pre-colonial chiefdoms in what is now the Philippines.[23] This also resonates with Girard’s comment that “scapegoating is the ultimate craft of statesmanship.”[24] Given these, let me propose an explanation of how these massacres were activated: both the Spanish colonists and the indigenous militias under them were fluent with this “ultimate craft of statesmanship.” Flannery writes how the “Hispano-Filipino forces” that committed the mass murders included “Spaniards, Mexicans, Pampangans, Tagalogs, and Japanese fighting men.”[25] If the indigenous militias in Manila were similar to the naval forces in the Visayas, each would have been led by a *datu* (chief) and manned by his *timawa* (freemen or non-slave subjects), just like the old pre-colonial days. Scholarship on politics and violence in contemporary Philippines (e.g., *An Anarchy of Families*, edited by Alfred W. McCoy [1994]) have noted the continued relevance of the Austronesian "Big Man" or the Southeast Asian *Orang Besar*. The surreal and chilling 2012 documentary *The Act of Killing* follows a few of

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[21] I'm using "sangley" instead of "Chinese" to avoid an anachronism: this was prior to the age of nation-states. In *Necessary Fictions*, Caroline Hau notes how as late as 1818, the official classification of these immigrants from China was "sangley," but by "Rizal's time" (late 19th century), "chino replaced sangley in bureaucratic usage." (Hau 2000, 141).

[22] Kristie Patricia Flannery, *Piracy and the Making of the Spanish Pacific World*, Kindle ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024), Kindle loc. 1624.

[23] In *Raiding, Trading, and Feasting* (1999), Laura Lee Junker examines the role of ritual sacrifice of enslaved persons within the political economy of pre-colonial Visayan chiefdoms in what is now the central Philippines (see, for instance, 342).

[24] René Girard, "A Friday afternoon seminar with René Girard - 2006," audio podcast episode, *Violence & The Sacred*, Cornerstone Forum, August 4, 2021, 23:31, https://www.cornerstone-forum.org/podcast.

[25] Flannery, *Piracy*, Kindle loc. 1666.

these Orang Besar and their “Premen,”[26] the perpetrators of the 1965 Indonesian massacres, as they reminisce about and reenact their murders, the bodycount of which is estimated to have reached 500,000.[27] In one scene eleven minutes into the film, an Orang Besar explains how their witch, Communism, will never succeed in Indonesia as long as there are Premen. “But if we know how to work with them, all we have to do is direct them,” the translation of his words read. This Big Man knows the craft.

Scapegoating as the ultimate craft of statesmanship might also be a helpful explanation for Rodrigo Duterte's rise to power and continued popularity throughout his presidency. In his 2016 paper, "The Spectacle of Violence in Duterte's 'War on Drugs'," Danilo Andres Reyes argues that Duterte's "war on drugs" uses the body in a spectacle of humiliation and violence designed to intimidate criminals and to convince ordinary citizens that they can feel protected.[28] Reyes draws on Foucault's concept of the "spectacle of the scaffold" to explain how this public display of violence serves as a political ritual that activates the power of the sovereign. This is scapegoating as

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[26] "Preman," the Bahasa Indonesia cognate of "freeman," is striking to me, a Filipino, who grew up seeing "timawa" usually translated to English as "freeman." In *The Act of Killing*, however, the meaning of the freedom of these men is explained in a way closer to Nietzsche's "beyond good and evil." This resonates with Sahlins and Graeber's analysis of mythical hero-kings, who often rise to power through acts that break taboos and conventional morality, thereby manifesting a nature that sets them apart from and above those they come to rule (e.g., Sahlins & Graeber, 2017, Kindle loc. 298).

[27] Geoffrey B. Robinson, *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), ix.

[28] Reyes, Danilo Andres. "The Spectacle of Violence in Duterte’s 'War on Drugs'." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 111-137.

statesmanship. Drug users and dealers became modern-day witches, blamed for the country's ills and sacrificed in a brutal display of state power. This campaign, while horrifying to many outside observers, resonated deeply with a significant portion of the Philippine population, uniting them against a common enemy. Duterte's rhetoric, which often dehumanized drug users and glorified violence against them, mirrors the language used in historical instances of scapegoating. His promise of swift and violent justice against this designated group tapped into deep-seated fears and aggression, much like how the disciples of Barong collectively stabbed at Rangda. Reyes notes that Duterte's approach has been so effective that it has influenced other politicians, spreading this form of violent governance beyond Davao to other parts of the Philippines.

Philippine anthropology's preferential option for the oppressed Other has created an epistemic blindspot. When studying conflicts involving Indigenous peoples or environmental exploitation, I only hear the voice of the victims, mostly through ethnographies. The violent military, the corrupt politicians, the capitalists, and the "settlers" are treated like shadowy and impersonal forces. This personal observation appears to be a symptom of a broader trend in Philippine scholarship. Caroline S. Hau, who surely has a comprehensive view of Philippine studies given her vast scholarly work, opens her 2017 book *Elites and Ilustrados in Philippine Culture* with a chapter that highlights both the importance of "elites and ilustrados" in understanding Philippine history and society and the dearth of studies of their cultures. The aversion for "grand theories" such as Girard's is also an epistemic blindspot. Explanations like the scapegoat mechanism can help us understand matters of deadly importance. If Girard is correct, the dragon continues to lie dormant within us and will awaken, hungry for blood, when summoned by a king that speaks its language. If prophets are to save the victims of sacrifice, they must understand not only the scapegoat; they must know the truth about the king and the dragon, and prophesy against them.

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