

# ***“Catching Fire”***

Toward a Cognitive Archaeology  
of Religious Pyrotechnics

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*“The mind is not a vessel to be filled,  
but a fire to be kindled.”*

| Plutarch

## **introduction**

This paper is intended to provide a brief synopsis of cognitive archaeological methodology. I will use this as an approach in discussing the role of fire in religious ritual and its cause-and-effect relationship with human consciousness. I will be using a number of case studies to outline my position: that the controlled use of fire enabled human consciousness to evolve and that this (r)evolutionary development allowed for increasingly layered cosmological interpretations of the element of fire, of the world, and of the human mind. I have attempted to draw from much of our source material in order to structure a distilled, generalized outline of this very large, very complex topic.

## **the aims of cognitive archaeology**

The introduction of a “cognitive” component to the discipline of archaeology has arisen out of a need to synthesize past methodologies that focused on materialist and structural-functionalist ideologies. These methods—while not completely ineffectual—seem to leave out the one crucial aspect, that of human experience. “The assumption that all human behavior can be accounted for on rational, ecological or adaptive grounds is unwarranted . . . (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:10).” Cognitive archaeology is used as “a framework for analysis which is neither a mindless ecology nor a glorification of mind divorced from the land (Flannery and Marcus 1994:55).” Essentially, we must form a continuum outlining how our ancestors acted in the physical world, reacted in their mental worlds, and how these processes intersect.

The evolution of human culture and the evolution of religion are intertwined processes and therefore make for fruitful arenas for a cognitive archaeology. These systems depend not only on social structure and subsistence techniques, but also on human emotions. It is our emotional sense that allows for empathy—perhaps the most vital connection that is formed in social groups (Durkheim 1912:157) (de Waal 2013:132). It would be impossible for human culture to exist without this component. By uniting materialist and processual theories and adding elements of human emotional experience, cognitive archaeology is “founded on the idea that modern people can relive

some feelings and emotions experienced by our ancestors because past and present people are both human and similar (Vianello 2013:3).”

### **the focal points of cognitive archaeology**

Cognitive archaeology focuses mainly on human tool development and usage, language, and artistic expression (Vianello 2013:1). It is important to view these not only according to their functional properties but also their symbolic manifestations. Each of these represents a complex suite of brain power and complex social awareness. They are sets of complex symbols used to transmit ideas within groups and without, and like human consciousness itself, these three focal points exist on a spectrum that occupies both the physical and mental worlds. Cognitive archaeology focuses explicitly upon these because they represent the “special human ability to construct and use symbols (Renfrew 1994:5).” These main focal points presuppose a level of cognition and intelligence that is uniquely human (as far as we know) and therefore evolutionary in both natural and cultural contexts.

Vianello’s designation of these three critical focal points of cognitive archaeological study originally places “intelligence” at the fore, though I find this to be too generalized to place in the list. Intelligence of a certain degree is required for the creation and cognition of symbols, and therefore must inevitably have arisen before—allowing the evolution of tool development, language, and artistic expression. I believe that the controlled use of fire beginning approximately 400,000 yBP by *H. erectus* was the proverbial “spark” that allowed consciousness to evolve.

### **ways of thinking about fire**

There is a paucity of archaeological research on both fire's materiality and its semiotic experience. This is perhaps most easily explained by the fact that a fire’s flames are obviously absent from the archeological record. The limited temporal existence of any fire makes it problematic even for many artists in the Classical world to depict it. Many “fires” in these early works show pyrotechnic installations at the moment just prior to ignition. However temporal the pyrotechnic event may be, evidence of such

events are often preserved for long periods of time; we see evidence for fires in the charred remains that are left behind: fire-cracked rock, burnt seeds and bones, slag from the forge, etcetera (Gheorghiu & Nash 2007).

It seems that much of the archeological research that has been conducted has been content to focus on the material culture at hand. This has generally been accomplished by creating intricate typologies of pyrotechnic installations, the main categories being: hearths, kilns, lamps, incense burners, and altars. These typologies have been quite useful in establishing cultural chronologies, assemblages, and movements of peoples and ideas. They can tell us much through their materiality, iconography, and placement within sites.

This is all well and good. However, it seems problematic in that a typology of say, Cypriot kilns, does not necessarily tell us much—if anything at all—regarding how people experienced their use. What did they think of the kiln as an object? And more importantly, how did they regard it in relation to what it was doing? And finally, how is its function and the experience of it situated within the cultural landscape? We must begin to understand how fire may have been perceived in the ancient world. Perhaps by taking what was discussed above in regard to a shared cognitive experience, we can discuss how fire was not only a material, but also a symbol. I will attempt to make the case that the ways in which fire is perceived and experienced is relative to the way in which cultural meanings are attached to symbols—that is, that fire in these contexts can be seen to reflect an increasingly complex milieu of cultural systems.

This paper categorizes the use fire in three substantial ways: as a transformative element, as a magical transubstantiative process, and as a transcendent experience. These ideas will be unpacked forthwith, however a framework for this categorization is first in order. This categorization can be seen as not only a sequential ordering of cognitive processes but also as a spectrum for the human experience of pyrotechnics. Arguably, the early hominin experience of fire was one of functional use. As mastery increased, fire may have been seen as a magical substance able to accomplish

increasingly detailed manufacturing processes (Dannaway 2010). This paper suggests that these developments elevated pyrotechnics to such an extent as to play an intrinsic role in ritual, thus becoming a sacred fire which may have been viewed as part of a divine interaction.

A cognitive framework allows us to view these three pyrotechnic categories as having occurred sequentially along with the development of human culture and experience. I do not mean to suggest that there is one sort of track that outlines a temporally sequential trajectory in regard to pyrotechnic experiences. Rather, this framework is merely suggestive of basic, irreducible elements of fire and the human experience.

The control of transformational fire depended on for survival seems to have evolved into a mastery of the element, which enabled its use in transubstantiative manufacturing processes. This in turn led to its inclusion in religious and ritualistically transcendent experiences. The archaeological record attests to this categorical sequence (Gowlett, et al. 2012; Gheorghiou & Nash 2007; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2005). As cognitive archaeologists we can empathize with the experiences of ancient people in regard to fire in all three contexts. Sitting around a campfire, firing a pot in a kiln, or lighting a candle at a Catholic Mass validates these notions. Fire, it seems, still captivates us.

### **fire in four acts**

Some of the earliest known examples of the controlled use of fire are found at Koobi Fora, Kenya. Around 1.6 million years ago, the Homo erectus inhabitants there emerged as a “pyro-culture,” using high temperature fire to create stone and bone implements (Gheorghiou & Nash 2007:14). Later examples turn up circa 460,000 BCE in places as far afield as Zhoukoudian (China), l’Escale (France), and Vertesszolos (Hungary) (Gheorghiou & Nash 2007:14). The control of fire necessitates these advances, and according to the “Expensive Gut Hypothesis” it was this even earlier

pyrotechnic control that allowed our early ancestors to evolve the mechanism which allows culture to form and evolve.

These early fires are intrinsic to the “development of humanness” (Wrangham et al. 1999) because they contributed to important morphological changes in the human body and brain. Fire enabled our ancestors to cook food and stay warm. This allowed for a decrease in the size of jaw muscles and digestive organs, an increase in the amount of nutrients and energy which provided for brain growth (paving the way for consciousness), and a wider dietary spectrum (Larsen 2011:342-3). “Early humankind’s mastery of fire ignited new evolutions in humanity’s quest for survival” (Dannaway 2010:485). The development of consciousness is perhaps the most important moment in our recent evolution. Perhaps we can view the early control of fire as bridging the gap between natural and artificial selection.

There are a handful of archaeologists who have devoted themselves to the study of the materiality and symbolism of fire. Many of them are published in *The Archaeology of Fire: Understanding Fire as Material Culture* (2007), a text contributed to, and edited by Dragos Gheorghiu and George Nash. In it, they put forth twenty-three qualities of fire in its relationship to social life. Following Vianello's short list of cultural-symbolic systems (generalized intelligence, language, tool development and usage, artistic expression, and ritual and religious expression), I will begin to place these twenty-three qualities into my framework of fire as being an agent of transformation, an element of transubstantiation, and transcendent experience.

As fire continues to renegotiate cultural elements, it explodes into a vast array of transcendent spiritual roles. Just as fire occupies a pivotal place between our non-conscious forebears and those more familiar to us—as it transforms the darkness into light—cold to warmth—vulnerability to security—as it, if by magic permanently alters substances to improve and deepen social life, so here, it becomes a liminal agent imbued with divine power. This new “fire power” is manifested cross-culturally in many not-so-dissimilar ways.

In the human mind, fire was seen as an important, magical elemental force within a tiered cosmology. Its importance is owed to both its duality of power (creation/destruction, condemnation/sanctification, for example) and its location within liminal space. In some ways, we can think of these two aspects as being intertwined, that is: the religious power of fire may lie in its conception as an agent of liminality. For the purpose of this paper, I am using Victor Turner's definition as: "Entities which are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial . . . liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon (Turner 1969:95)." We are able to explore this in greater detail with a few quick case studies.

### **an agent of transformation**

By accounting for a generalized intelligence, we may find fire's value as an agent of transformation in its utility for survival. This somewhat simple view of fire appeals to our senses. It transforms a dark dwelling into a lit one, a cold one to a warm one. It transforms raw food into cooked nourishment, it provides a sense of protection from predators, and it tends to gather individuals around it, providing a focal point of community. Perhaps it is around these early fires that language developed and the oral tradition blossomed? That many cross-cultural oral traditions feature myths of trickster deities and fire-theft may attest to this. We still tell campfire stories.

Gheorghiu and Nash (2007) tend to emphasize the essential role that fire played in group socialization. They extrapolate this further ahead into time by suggesting that this may have also led to socializing with ancestors and deities, but let us stay on task. Time around a fire tends to promote many types of narrative—fond remembrances, frightening stories, and proverbs to name a few. It is likely that our earliest ancestors began processes of language socialization around such fires.

Complex linguistic practices tend to create temporal realities: past, present, and future. As socialization continues, memories are spoken aloud and begin to be in the

world. Fires generated these linguistic processes and performances, and with them, history (Gheorghiu & Nash 2007). Fires here, are temporal in nature; they are more useful at night and therefore come to adopt a "cyclical character" (Gheorghiu & Nash 2007). Certain times of day and seasons of the year would have undoubtedly had an effect on where and when fires were lit, and it is certainly conceivable that our ancestors would have been able to detect the natural rhythm of these cycles.

### **the “magic” of transubstantiation**

I understand that transubstantiation is a term that is part and parcel of the Roman Catholic faith. It is the notion that during Holy Communion, the bread and wine ingested actually becomes the body and blood of Christ. I'm using this particular term because I feel that it captures an idea of the changing of familiar substances into novel ones by a sort of magic. The same notion that water can be changed to wine, or wine to blood, is not new. This strange magic was experienced in a very real way as tool production and tool usage were catapulted forward by pyrotechnic installations.

By adhering to Humphrey's notion of the reentrant feedback loop cycling through delay differential attractors, we can view fire's seemingly magical ability to transubstantiate objects as an attribute which suggests that higher functions and deeper meanings became attached to elemental fire. Fire's magic burned wood and stone implements to increase their strength, it “fired” clay vessels into ceramic ones, and it forged copper and tin to make bronze, etcetera. Recent work by Marie-Chantal Frere Sautot suggests that the process of metallurgy led to “a change in behaviour, beliefs, and social order, as compared to the preceding [southern European] Neolithic societies . . . still deprived of a tradition of writing (2007:154).”

Early cooking fires most likely initiated an engendering of domestic space, and these new modes of production (agriculture, pottery, metallurgy) required different types of pyrotechnic installations. Ultimately, it seems natural to suggest that this was a major force in the rise of craft specialization. The proper usage of pyrotechnic installations of any kind associated with tool and object production would require

training and probably some kind of arcane knowledge (Frere-Sautot 2007). As this mastery of transubstantiative fire increased, so too did not only its reverential perception, but also that of those who managed to master it. Fires were used to clear land, thus modeling nature in order to produce newly fertilized crops. In addition to cooking fires, smoking and curing of meats preserved them for longer periods of time (Gheorghiu & Nash 2007); we see here the transubstantiation of agricultural processes via pyrotechnics.

Pyrotechnic installations in ceramic and metallurgical contexts obviously changed the nature of thermoplastic materials. Pottery manufacturing is a fairly straight-forward process, and conceivably preceded that of metallurgy. It is the evolution of metallurgy by which we have divided the ages of mankind: the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, or how about the Gilded Age, or talk about the Golden Age of this or that. These metals and materials come about through complex processes of refinement, both in a literal sense and in the metaphorical ones just previously mentioned. Frere-Sautot offers that this refinement takes place in three stages, producing “at least three successive states of matter with remarkable changes in appearance. What happens at the centre of a hearth in a restricted space, in the ‘secret’ of a furnace, is like the ripening of a young fruit, solid inert rock turns into a fluid and then resumes its solid state (2007:159).” It takes an incredible amount of energy to produce these materials, and at their hearts, kilns and forges glowed white-hot. They must have been seen as sources of immense power.

### **a transcendent fire**

That these processes seem “magical” is what leads me to suggest that these pyrotechnic installations came to be thought of and experienced in even more abstract ways. The conception of what fire is and what it does—whether through transformation, transubstantiation, or transcendent experience—is not always clearly demarcated; fire and its properties can be conceived of multi-functionally. In a way, this is merely how we can see the evolution of its cultural and symbolic perception. Moving from fire as a transubstantiative element to one that promotes transcendent spiritual experiences, we

focus on hearths and altars. With these pyrotechnic installations, we begin to see a duality in the perception of fire between the physical and the celestial.

It seems evident that from the Upper Paleolithic onward, elemental fire had evolved with human consciousness and become more than a useful tool—it had taken on symbolic qualities, as well. Long before a Western reality that is scientifically “known,” our Upper Paleolithic and early Neolithic ancestors probably did not draw hard definitions between the natural and supernatural; perhaps it was blended together, or natural and *extra-natural*. The two realities were closely linked—to the point where invisible entities were likely thought to hold power. Fire was most likely experienced in this way. Tallow fires were integral elements of cave rituals, ushering in sensory experiences after deprivation (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:82-3). Ancient Egyptians, Persians, and Hindus held the belief that fire had once been a living spirit with an insatiable appetite (Watts 1963:26) (*The Landmark Herodotus* 2007:214).

It follows that the use and regulation of the extremely powerful element of fire was controlled by members of a priest class or shaman-like figure (Abramiuk 2012:248). People were engaged in shared experiences through objects and symbols. According to Baltus and Baires, this creates a “relational ontology,” which is “the notion that humans and objects exist in a reciprocal world, and that this world is phenomenological—resulting from observation and experience of similarities and differences in the qualities of people, objects, places, and entities (Baltus and Baires 2012:170).” Fire was becoming something more than a transformative element, it was becoming transubstantiative. They continue, “Within the context of the transference of power(s) through fire, an understanding of this relational animate ontology allows for the interpretation of fire as a person or force of change rather than a tool of change (Baltus and Baires 2012:170).”

As mentioned earlier, pyrotechnic installations such as incense burners, kilns, hearths, altars, and pyres served to illuminate religious experiences by evoking liminality. From Gheorghiou and Nash, “It had a character of separation, of liminality and simultaneously of connection between different realms, being a medium of passage,

and being connected with the rites of passage.” At an individual level, this is certainly attested to in funerary and mortuary contexts by the practice of cremation. The physical body is “purified” and the body, consumed by the flames, releases the soul. In the wider social context, ritual sacrifice of animals had a dual benefit. The altar with its rising smoke, became an *axis mundi*, communing with the deity for the sake of the group—who often were allowed to socialize and share in the feast by partaking of certain portions of the sacrifice.

At the megalithic tomb site Bryn Celli Ddu “hearths and what seems to have been a spread of white quartz pebbles were placed at the entrance. Moreover, hearths were also found built up on either side of the entrance: fire marked and framed the transition to the interior (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:181).” At the center of the henge is a pit which shows evidence of ritual burning and in it, a human ear bone has been recovered. This may suggest that those involved with the ceremony believed that the deceased would need sensory organs in the next tier of the cosmic journey (though fleshy organs such as eyeballs would not be present to analyze). For that matter, the senses too, are liminal. They are the bridge between the outside world and our bodies.

At Barclodiad y Gawres, a ritual hearth has been uncovered at the end of the passage grave. Analysis provides evidence for a “stew” that had been poured over this hearth. Its contents included “tiny bones of eel, whiting, wrasse (a brightly colored, rock-haunting fish), frog, toad, natterjack (a striped species of toad), grass snake, mouse, shrew, and rabbit . . . creatures that went into the brew are transitional in a comparable but somewhat different way: they move from the surface of the land to underground areas (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:191).” Others, obviously are amphibious and inhabit two distinct habitats. These are liminal animals, burned with liminal fire, in a passage grave (emphasis to be placed on the word *passage* here). This offering of liminal creatures may provide an early glimpse into the practice of leaving votive offerings in later Bronze Age burials, where objects crafted with fire were often buried with the dead.

Death is viewed as the ultimate state of liminality—as the threshold between this reality and the next. Fire plays a unique role in this state, and I will return to this shortly. First, let us examine other liminal roles of ceremonial fire. In his book *The Golden Bough*, Sir James George Frazer comments on the fire-festivals of Europe. He describes “the custom of kindling great bonfires, leaping over them, and driving cattle through or round them (Frazer 1922:641).” Frazer offers two leading theories of his time regarding these ceremonial fires: the “solar theory” which is a sort of imitative magic designed to reproduce and ensure a needful amount of sunshine to grow a successful harvest, and the “purificatory theory” which posits that the fires are burned to “blast” and “consume” malevolent spirits from the air. I think that we may cautiously assume that this may not have been a case of “either/or” but one of “and.” He goes on to comment that these ceremonies were ubiquitous throughout Europe and that these rites were most always conducted during solstices and equinoxes—these being seen as seasonal thresholds.

There are plenty of cross-cultural examples of fire being used for purification or as a “disinfectant.” Walking through fire was a test in ancient Greece, and the practice survived into the Crusades. “During the first Crusade, the ‘sacred spear’ of Christ was allegedly excavated at Antioch. Enthusiasm was soon followed by skepticism, and clerics made the happy discoverer walk through fire with his spear; he died of his burns. The fire’s testimony was efficacious (Burkert 1996:164).”

Purifying fire is not a concept confined to Europe. These ceremonies are also prevalent in North America. Native North American groups have a shared sense of the “Sacred Fire” and its role in purifying and re-sanctifying places and objects (Baltus and Baires 2012:172). The intentional burning of structures containing ritual implements within the Cahokian world, for instance, suggests that fire was used to terminate religious use of these objects—to “kill” their magic, or to erase the “sacredness” of the location; this had the effect of rendering powerful places and objects inert. On the other hand, burned objects are found *in situ* within the massive earthen pyramids at the site, suggesting that these objects were imbued with power. In yet other cases, entire layers

of the earthen pyramids are comprised of burnt soil. “The burned structures containing religious or supra-domestic materials seemed to have been burned . . . as a religious act in which certain powerful substances and objects were transubstantiated through fire—connecting these gathered powers with other worlds (Baltus and Baires 2012:181).”

The power of re-sanctification by fire was understood by all members of the community. The Sacred Fire was consecrated and spread to fireplaces of powerful Osage chiefs. The embers taken from them were “considered holy and possessing life-giving powers (Baltus and Baires 2012:172).” This is reminiscent of Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth. Embers were ritually taken from the Temple of Vesta for use in the home. The temple itself was considered a place of liminality and purity—the holy flames tended by Vestal Virgins. Like the Romans, the Cahokians believed that these hearth fires gave power to ancestors. The fire and smoke were pathways between the natural and “extra-natural” worlds.

Rite of passage ceremonies are to be seen as moving initiants from one reality to another. These often incorporate elements of purification and re-sanctification. Initiants are often quarantined, and stripped naked or almost naked. Rites of passage are intrinsically liminal moments (Turner 1969:94). Arguably, death is the ultimate rite of passage, and perhaps there is no more striking use of fire within mortuary contexts than that of cremation. “The journey of the dead was almost certainly from one level of a multi-tiered cosmos to another, assisted at each transition by rituals that the living performed . . . seers performed various rituals with the (usually cremated) remains . . . whose journey upwards, through the cone of the corbelled roof, through the mound and up into the sky . . . where they consorted with the sun and became closely associated with solar events, such as the winter solstice (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005:278).”

The sky may have had extra-natural notions tied to it. It was a part of nature that human beings could not inhabit in normal states of consciousness. Perhaps this explains monumental architecture associated with religion and death. Smoke from cremated bodies may have represented a form of travel into the realm of the sky. This works in several ways. In a ceremony of cremation, smoke was a visually verifiable way to ensure

the passing of the individual to the next cosmological tier. It also offered a direct link with this upper world of ancestral deities—smoke rises to the heavens, and ash is left on the earth.

Cremation is a localized custom, and it has been known to go in and out of favor over time. However, other mortuary practices linking earth and sky are found in the archaeological record. Ex-carnation is another, where carrion crows feast on the flesh of the deceased and (presumably) take flight up into the sky. Interestingly, many Australian Aboriginal cultures view the crow as the creature that stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind. Similarities are found even in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPNA) at Çatalhöyük, where there are images of human beings with vulturized features—heads, beaks, and wings (Hodder and Meskell 2011:244). Cremation and ex-carnation were likely practiced at Anatolian sites at this time, as interred bodies are rarely found. Skulls are generally kept, though, suggesting a veneration of ancestors, perhaps transubstantiated into bird-human hybrids.

### **offerings in flame: controlling fire, controlling death**

Feasting plays a major role in mortuary ceremonies. Many Celtic burials such as those at Vix, France and Hochdorf, Germany contain drinking vessels and other feasting equipment. However, communicating with the ancestral deities (and later, deities) via death ceremonies was difficult to control. Indeed, group survival hopes to avoid death. Ritual sacrifice may have been developed in order to codify the ways and the choose the times a particular community was able to have these powerful experience.

In some ways, sacrifice encapsulates the element of fire in every conception within the mind. An animal is offered up to the flames in place of a human. Fire roasts the flesh and some is consumed by the ritual participants in a feast. John Pedley, Professor Emeritus of Classical Archaeology at the University of Michigan describes a typical Greek sacrifice at the Panathenaic Festival: “The festival began with a procession out to Eleutherai to retrieve an old statue of Dionysos and bring it back to Athens. A young girl was the carrier of the basket in which was hidden the knife to be used to cut

the victims' throats. The garlanded procession delivered the animals to the altar, and the priest then said a prayer or two. Ritual dances and incantations were performed. The priest next sprinkled water and grains of barley -- symbolizing purification and fertility -- on the victim, the altar, and the attendants. The animal then bowed its head, presumably hoping to eat: but this gesture was taken to signify its willingness to die. The priest cut a tuft of hair from the beast's head and threw them on the fire on the altar. Thus, the consecration was complete. Then came the killing.

Struck by a cleaver, the beast collapsed stunned or almost dead. The sacrificial knife, hidden beneath the sacred barley, was removed from the young girl's basket; the animal was hoisted up . . . and its throat cut. Its blood flowed over the altar into basins; its hide removed, and its carcass dismembered and butchered on a table nearby. Various parts were given to the priest: the hide, tail, or tongue for example. The fatty thigh bones, rich in marrow, were the portions reserved for the gods. They were burnt away on the altar, the smoke rising (it was thought) to the heavens. Wine and oil were poured into the flames. Finally, the rest of the meat was cut up, cooked in cauldrons, and given to the rest of the worshippers, either to be eaten in a communal meal or taken away. Gods and Greeks ate meat from the same beasts, and drank the same wine.”(Pedley 2005:82).” Certainly this was not only a sensory experience for worshippers but also one of “sentition” as defined by Nicholas Humphrey. The sacrifice is communion not only with group members but also with the gods. Worshippers inhabit two distinct realities. The ritual act becomes “a virtual expression occurring at the level of a virtual body, hidden inside [the] head (Humphrey 2011:49).”

It is telling that the prescription for a proper sacrifice in the Greco-Roman world was laid down in the famous Hesiodic myth of the titan Prometheus. His trickery of Zeus (“father of the sky”) gave mankind the gift of fire, and also allowed for the meaty portions of the sacrifice to be shared amongst human worshippers. Often, these sacrifices took place on large *pisé* platforms—essentially mounds of rammed earth and ash from past ritual, reaffirming sky-earth linkages. Again, as with the crow, we can see commonalities between death, communion, and fire theft. These ideas seem to be engraved upon human consciousness.

Above, I mentioned that ritual sacrifice best exemplifies fire as a consciously powerful force. It offers social contact and resource sharing in the cooking of food, it occupies a liminal niche in that it not only purifies and re-sanctifies but also provides a link between earth and sky—between the living and the dead, and between the natural and extra-natural worlds. In this way, fire is the most powerful *axis mundi* that the mind has created. I argue that this aspect allows for a feeling of transcendence, in that a worshipper's consciousness *feels* linked to a supernatural "reality," what Humphrey would call "a magic show that lights up the world."

### **in conclusion**

We often see religion evolving into more abstracted forms over time. We have discussed in class that this may be a reflection of moving from small societal groups into ever-larger culturally "dissonant" societies. Human consciousness has had to evolve with these changes, and perhaps we can say that in some sense, it is the driving force behind them. As religion has evolved to keep pace with consciousness, its forms and elements have evolved with it. The perception of "fire" in accordance with religion and consciousness has been witness to this evolution from the physical to the metaphysical. We see fire's beginnings not only allowing for human consciousness to take root, but also as a tool being used in ever more creative ways until it becomes a symbol of transformation, transubstantiation, and ultimately transcendence.

This evolution carries on. Tanya Luhrmann describes a "cognitive dissonance" as modern Evangelicals negotiate their consciousness to be situated between the natural and supernatural worlds (Luhrmann 2012:268). They see themselves as conduits through which the creator of the universe is able to speak. The *axis mundi* has shifted from the monumental to the mind. When this shift occurred, on the Day of Pentecost (as in, from where Pentecostal Evangelicals draw their doctrine), this is how it is described in the Book of Acts, chapter two: "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit

enabled them.” Speaking in tongues is a highly emotional response to stimuli and is an altered state of consciousness. In this biblical passage, it is clear that fire becomes part of a transcendent consciousness for these worshippers.

The fire burns on.

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