The ISIS Beheading Narrative

By Doyle Quiggle
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In this article, I apply Jonathan Matusitz’s insights from Symbolism in Terrorism to identify and isolate the plotline of the ISIS beheading narrative.[i] If we want to undermine and neutralize ISIS internet recruitment propaganda (the E-jihad), then we need to understand how and why their symbols appeal to their target audience. Narratives kick symbols into motion. ISIS are excellent narrators. We must find ways to counter-narrate and neutralize their group-forming narratives.

Qu’ran 47:4: “When you encounter the unbelievers on the battlefield, strike off their heads until you have crushed them completely; then bind the prisoners tightly.”

Because ISIS communicators legitimize beheading by reference to Islamic history and Islamic theology, local Islamic authorities who do not share ISIS’s interpretation of Sura 47:4 will need to take careful heed of how ISIS have made beheading into a powerful symbol and narrative of their jihad. [ii] Beheading an enemy, an Islamic terrorist symbolically links his (increasingly her) Jihad today to the sword-driven rise of Medieval Islamic Empire and to the late Medieval and Early Renaissance blood-soaked contest between Christendom and Islam for control of Europe. A symbolic connection is made objectively visible in the beheading by the use of the most important Islamic Salafic weapon—the sword. Therefore, to understand the full symbolic energies of Islamic beheadings today, we must also understand the past symbolism of swords and blood in Islam. Here, I will introduce only the symbolic structure of the ISIS beheading narrative.[iii]

Timothy Furnish, a leading scholar of Islamic beheadings, notes:

“The Islamic is the only major world religion today that is cited both by state and non-state actors to legitimise beheadings…In contradiction to the assertions of apologists, both Muslim and non-Muslim, these beheadings are not simply a brutal method of drawing attention to the Islamist political agenda and weakening an opponent’s will to fight. Zarqawi and other Islamists who practise decapitation believe that God has ordained them to obliterate their enemies in this manner.” [iv]

The ISIS beheading narrative derives its moral, legal, and theological authority directly from Islam. [v] But it swipes some of its aesthetic appeal from non-Islamic sources, such as comic books, film, and video
games. These non-Islamic sources have long circulated images of beheading in popular culture and have kept decapitation actively present in the visual fields and cultural imaginations of potential ISIS recruits, especially of gamers.

Biologically, neurologically, and anthropologically understood, narrative performs the primary social function of creating cohesion and cooperation among in-group members. Creating cohesion and cooperation and activating the altruistic pre-adaptations of group members is why we evolved narrative as a primary social tool of our species. Out of the feeling of cohesion created by shared narrative there emerges powerful, neurologically compulsive feelings of reciprocal altruism, commitment to the group—trust. Neurologically, we encode narrative-induced cohesion-trust as courage. And courage is as indispensable a virtue to small hunting parties on the ancient Savannah as it is to SF operators storming a qalat compound in Afghanistan or to ISIS fighters in Iraq.[vi]

The ISIS beheading narrative performs all primary, primal social tasks for group members, beginning as communal blood ritual and ending as a personal trophy that increases a member’s sense of pride in his group membership.

The Beheading Plotline

In her book on beheadings in literature, LOSING OUR HEADS: BEHEADINGS IN LITERATURE AND CULTURE, Regina Jones (2005) identifies these four categories of beheading: Judicial; Sacrificial; Presentational; Trophy.

Judicial: Citing a Wahhabist interpretation of Islamic justice, SAUDI ARABIA beheads criminals it has found guilty of murder, drug trafficking, rape, burglary, witchcraft, and apostasy. The state of Saudi Arabia thereby symbolically and jurisprudentially legitimises ISIS beheadings. And we may wonder if the international community indirectly legitimises beheadings because it recognizes the legitimacy of Saudi Arabian state-conducted decapitation—JUDICIAL beheading.

Sacrificial: Borrowing legitimacy from Saudi Arabia, ISIS beheadings participate in all four beheading categories. However, ISIS beheadings begin as a form of RITUALISTIC murder. All ritual is a kind narrative that derives its meaning largely from sequence, doing things in the correct order at the correct moment, just as narrative creates meaning by having characters do things (events) through time.

ISIS beheadings begin as COMMUNAL BLOOD RITUALS. As with any ritual, the beheading ritual is performed to create cohesion and loyalty among ISIS members. The fear and outrage that beheading creates among non-ISIS onlookers often obscures the “group-building” aspect of the beheading narrative. Creating terror, however, is not the main goal of beheadings at this stage in the narrative plot. The social goal is to create group cohesion.[vii]

Beheading as communal blood ritual is also used as a rites of passage to initiate newcomers, to mark their identities as “timeless” Jihadis, to link them to an eternal, timeless, “sacred” space. Beheading as communal blood ritual cleanses European-born ISIS of “Westoxification.” That term (in Persian, Gharbzadegi) was first used by the Ayatollah Khomeini during the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) to mean “the state of being inebriated with Western culture and ideas.”[viii] ISIS beheadings represent a symbolic severing with Western ideals, beliefs, culture—the main source of the spiritual toxins that infect Islam, according to all-known varieties of modern Salafism. Beheading an infidel, the ISIS executioner symbolically cuts off his own “Western” head. He sacrifices an Infidel’s head to re-gain his Islamic identity.

Communal blood ritual inculpates ISIS members in the same crimes as their fellow Jihadis, a technique of
coerced loyalty typically practiced by criminal gangs. Beheading represents a point of no “legal” return. Moreover, beheading as communal blood ritual transforms a ritual participant’s neuro-network/brain chemistry. Beheading may embody a point of no psychological return as well.

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My hypothesis: As a communal blood ritual, beheading is a potently addictive psychotropic agent that radically and permanently alters the neurology of ritual participants. Corollary: The limbic system of ritual practitioners is permanently altered by the communal blood ritual of beheading. We must account for this neurological transformation when assessing any ISIS defector’s claims about rejecting violence as a form of religious practice. [ix]

(When displayed on YOUTUBE, a beheading video can also act as a remote communal blood ritual.)

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We need more information about who gets to perform beheadings within ISIS. Are beheadings “permitted” only to privileged members? Are ALL initiates required to attend beheadings? Are women allowed to participate directly in this ritual?

**Presentational:** The beheading plotline enters the mediation stage when the beheading becomes PRESENTATIONAL, a sign of victory in the Jihad. Presenting the decapitation is an assertion of success on the battlefield, even as the presentation is also meant to create terror in infidels. According to the logic of magical thinking, the blood spilled during the beheading and presented to a remote audience has the power to cleanse all of Islam, starting with the Infidel-contaminated territory (i.e. Libya) onto which the beheading blood is directly spilled. In this magical sense, the blood sacrifice presented and projected to a global Caliphate cleanses the mythic map of the greater Islamic Caliphate, which the ISIS Jihad purports to be re-conquering. When GPSed on today’s map, recent ISIS beheadings become a key part of ISIS mythic cartography, which corresponds to the imperial landmass of the Islamic Empire of Harun Al Rashid (ca. 800). Blood cleansing of the Salaf’s imagined Caliphate sets up the presentational use of the beheadings as a tool of recruitment, and the presentation of beheadings becomes a weapon in the Electronic Jihad (E-Jihad).

There’s a distinct aesthetic quality to ISIS beheading presentations. ISIS communicators clearly design beheading videos to maximize aesthetic pleasure for an ISIS audience, for example, making the executioners of the Coptic victims appear seven feet tall, as if they’re larger than life, like comic book and video game heroes. In mediation, such as Youtube, ISIS beheadings provide remote ISIS members, ISIS sympathizers, or the ISIS-curious a source of voyeuristic pleasure.

As noted above, the beheading narrative borrows its aesthetic appeal from non-Islamic sources that have primed today’s youth to critically “appreciate” beheading, especially blood on swords. The blood-dripping beheading sword resonates not only with slasher films but also with popular “sword & blade” films like Lord of the Rings and with even more popular video games like SKYRIM and the METAL GEAR SERIES (i.e. REVENGANCE) that feature decapitation as a regular part of gameplay. Video games do not create terrorists. My point is that decapitation had been implanted as a common feature of the cultural imaginary of game players and film goers long before ISIS began producing its version of Islamic snuff film. ISIS communicators exploit the decapitation pre-implantation of popular culture.

In its presentational mode, the beheading narrative announces victory on the battlefield, projects the blood cleansing of the ISIS mythic map (the global caliphate), and, with the aim of recruitment, exploits a pre-existing popular blood aesthetic in which the contemplation of beheading is source of pleasurable
entertainment. ISIS recruits have likely been primed to become decapitators both by Islamic and by non-Islamic imagery of beheading.

**Trophy:** The beheading plotline is consummated when the severed heads are made into personal possessions by ISIS members, to increase their status and prestige among fellow Jihadists. The heads become TROPHIES. They perform all of the typical cultural functions of other kinds of trophies. They mark the completion of a rites of passage.

Does the accumulation of heads, Colonel Kurtz style, increase status and prestige among ISIS members?

In sum, the ISIS beheading narrative begins at a primal, neuro-biological level, as a blood ritual meant to link ISIS members horizontally to each other, backward to an Islamic past of sword-driven imperial conquest, and vertically up into a timeless space of eternal Jihad. At the ritual stage, the narrative performs the primal evolutionary function of all narrative/ritual—to create group cohesion and loyalty. Specific to ISIS beheadings is how the “West-toxified” self of the ISIS member is sacrificed in order to gain or regain a purified Islamic identity. In cutting off the head of an infidel, the ISIS member heals himself of Occidentosis.

The communal blood ritual is then presented, via mediation, to a remote global audience, to signal victory in the Jihad and to project to the blood cleansing of the terra sancta of the caliphate. As a form of presentation, the beheading becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation (a source of pleasure) and a recruitment lure that exploits non-Islamic imagery of beheadings.

Finally, the severed heads become trophies used to increase prestige and status among ISIS members.

We need further investigation into the neuro-psychology of communal blood ritual. We also need to know the neurological implications of viewing blood rituals in mediation: To what bio-psychological extent does one participate in this ritual (experience the same neuro-peptide buzz) remotely, through the internet? We also need to contrast the beheading narrative/ritual to other, more pragmatic forms of ISIS violence.

End Notes


[iv] Timothy Furnish, “Beheading in the Name of Islam” in *The Middle East Quarterly*, (12 (2), 51-57,
2005)


About the Author

**Doyle Quiggle**

Doyle Quiggle (PhD, Washington University) has had the honor and privilege of being a professor to US Troops downrange, at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, Africa and at FOB Fenty, Jalalabad, Afghanistan. He researches the anthropology of war from within the battlespace, focusing on counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency.