

## ANCIENT SOUND IMPRINTS

by Hjorleifur Jonsson (Arizona State University)

“This is not a ghost” (Press release).

Arizona State University anthropologist Hjorleifur Jonsson, who works in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change, is surrounded by colleagues who study such exciting things as human origins, ancient DNA, and the ancient dynamics of state formation. As a mere cultural anthropologist and a fieldworker, Dr. Jonsson has long felt left behind by his more advanced colleagues. But he has now abandoned research in Asia and turned his analytical skills to important moments in US American history. Associate Professor Jonsson has developed a new scientific technology that recovers ancient sound imprints from preserved wood, primarily from the walls of old houses.

This new research technique regarding ancient sound has yielded preliminary results, based on actual research in Salem, MA. In his laboratory at ASU, Dr. Jonsson was able to reconstruct conversations from the sound-imprint left on the walls of particular buildings in English Pilgrim communities of ancient Massachusetts. Partial reconstruction (the research is ongoing) has revealed repeated discussions regarding the fate of unarmed teenage girls of color (white) who happened to walk around in their neighborhood but later were reduced to ashes by certain adult local people.

One wall in particular indicates the voice of a prominent member of the Pilgrim community who on repeated occasions declares the following: “I burned her on the stake in self-defense: She had witchcraft and she was aiming it at me and I caught her just in time and tied her to the stake. It was a close call because this danger can really wipe out a whole community of law-abiding people. Teenage white girls are a menace and a threat and there are only so many ways to respond.”

Professor Jonsson indicated in an interview that his days of research in Asia may be over. The

*humid tropics are very destructive of old wood and bamboo; there is thus practically nothing to work with regarding ancient sound, while his expensive laboratory needs research funding to keep the equipment running. But the recovery of ancient proto-US American conversations is already producing solid results (statistical comparisons of the sounds from different walls suggest a reliability measure of .05, which indicates scientifically valid results at the rate of 95%), and this may contribute to some socially relevant science. The professor concluded the interview on the note that his discovery coincided with Halloween, and that he was going to take part this year. He will be dressed up as an unarmed white girl from the seventeenth century, even if the prospect of leaving the laboratory armed only with this knowledge makes him quite nervous.*

The true elements in the above fake press-release-thing are my name and position, my university and school, and the descriptions of my accomplished colleagues and their research orientations. The rest is made up; my reasons for doing so are many and various. My professional career has focused mostly on ethnic minority peoples in Thailand and to a lesser extent in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Even if I am just some white, male, Western academic, I am also professionally, and by association, in the minority slot within Asia. Meanwhile I live in the United States where every month there is some big news about a scandal where in some city the police have gunned down an unarmed teenage boy who happens to be black, African-American. The whole thing is outrageous because such episodes are almost an everyday affair in this country, and no one seems to recognize that this is human sacrifice and that it is recurring on a frightening scale.

Roughly eighty years ago, Ruth Benedict (1934, *Patterns of Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press) wrote about how society can make people blind to some everyday patterns of abuse. She took the example of the witch-scare in the old Pilgrim community, and declared that no one could notice the madness of the old men in charge because they were the moral guardians of the society. Something about the regular occur-

rence of deadly shootings by the twenty-first-century US police force, in one city after another, triggered my recollection of Benedict's work. In contemporary news coverage the police will regularly be quoted as saying that they only shot in self-defense, and this certainly helped set up the notion of my claimed laboratory-extraction of ancient sound-imprints.

The contemporary self-image of US American society does not allow for the possibility that human sacrifice takes place there, much less that it may be an everyday occurrence that is performed by agents of law enforcement. This is roughly what led me to invent a laboratory and a research project. The enterprise, The Evolving Door Research Theater, is meant to be fun and surprising, but we will also occasionally take on some issues of social relevance. So far, the work has been done by me and some imaginary friends/colleagues. That is, not only have I invented a laboratory and research findings; some of the scientists are made up, too.

The project was set in motion by the realization of a parallel between the fate of some twenty-first century teenage black boys and that of some seventeenth-century teenage white girls. Once we realized that this parallel was (apparently) not admissible in contemporary US American society then the laboratory and the research staff came into being. That is, the findings occasioned the research process. We had seen/heard a ghost, and needed to use some (apparent) trickery to call attention to it.

The refraction of parallel ghostly voices between the seventeenth- and twenty-first centuries cannot be identified by science as it is conventionally conducted. Something about modernity's self-image appears to have made it unthinkable that human sacrifice was a regular part of life in the United States, or that it took place in the seventeenth century. In the spirit of René Magritte's painting of a pipe that declares that it is not a pipe, we shall of course announce that our laboratory experiments did not extract any ghostly voices from the old wood.