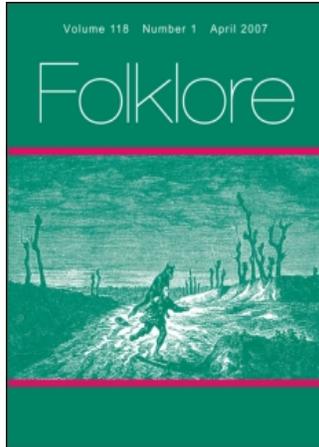


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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Hunting for History in Potam Pueblo: A Yoeme (Yaqui) Indian Deer Dancing Epistemology

David Delgado Shorter

### Abstract

Based on fieldwork with the Yoeme (Yaqui) Indians of northwest Mexico, this article traces the ties between contemporary deer dances and pre-colonial deer-hunting rituals. The author claims that indigenous performances provide documentary evidence not only of intercultural dynamics but also of how native people think historically about those dynamics. The essay details how, in Yoeme deer dancing, community members demonstrate collective identity as well as ontological and epistemological sensibilities. Additionally, it re-assesses the ethnohistoric utility of the term “conversion” when writing about colonial and missionary contact zones. As a research model, this project demonstrates the central role of performance studies within the field of folklore.

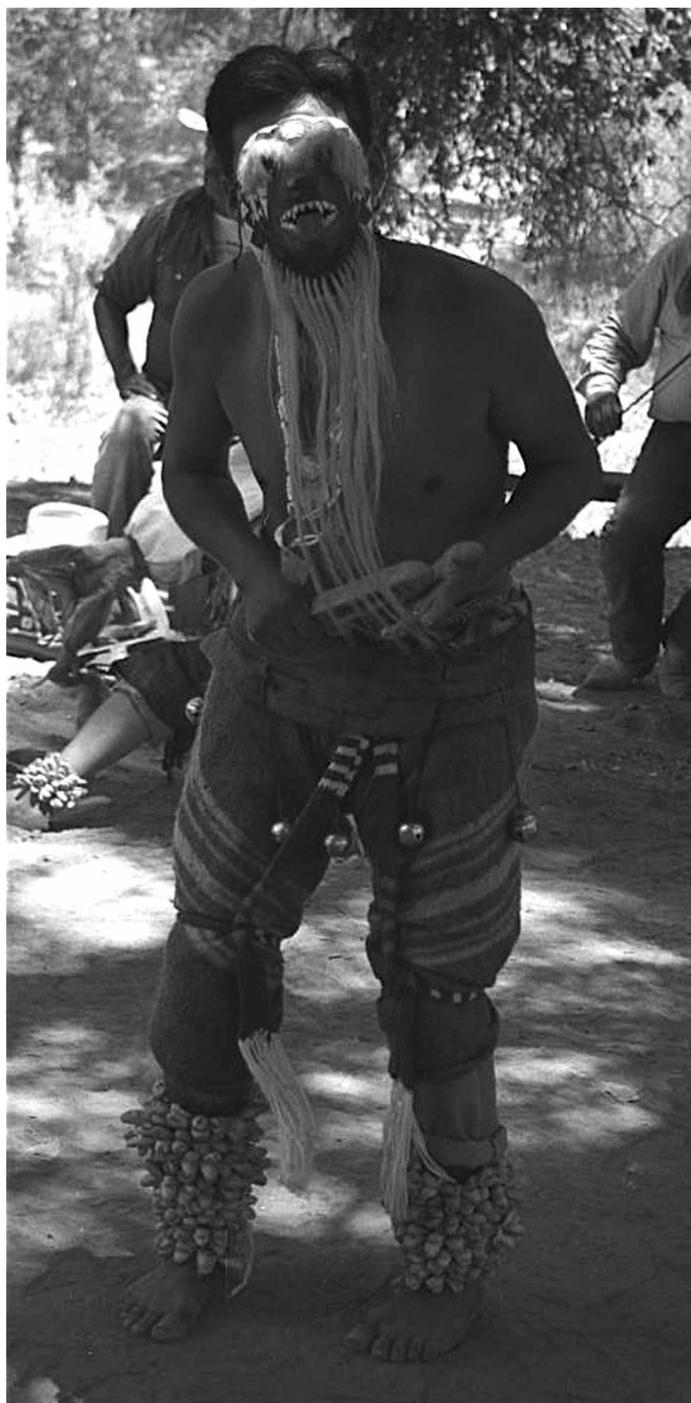
### Introduction

Throughout the northern state of Sonora, Mexico, one cannot go far without encountering the image of a deer dancer. It can be found on large governmental billboards, as sculptures along the highway (Figure 1), on public announcement flyers, and even on prepackaged grocery items such as salsa, milk, and bread. [1] For many Mexican citizens, these images do little more than associate a Sonoran heritage with the indigenous populations that “once lived there.” For many Yoemem, however, with communities in both northwestern Mexico and in the southwest of the United States, the deer-dancer image speaks to issues of cultural continuity, tribal sovereignty, and ritual sacrifice. [2] Earlier scholars of Yoeme ethnohistory noted that the deer dances and their associated *pahko’ola* dances (see Figure 2) contain a particularly clear example of pre-Jesuit Yoeme ritual, since these particular ceremonies make relatively few references to Christian symbols (Evers and Molina 1987, 25–33). All of the ethnographic literature, as well as the fieldwork that I carried out among Yoemem, suggest that deer dancing is associated with hunting—as a means of securing appropriate relations with the animal and plant world, especially the deer.

In the Yoeme homelands at the present time, deer hunts take place infrequently. My tribal collaborators emphasise the difficulty in successfully hunting deer, the danger of interpersonally offending deer through inappropriate behaviour, as well as the labour-intensive preparation of the deer carcass for ceremonial and household use. [3] Although everyone freely admits to enjoying it when an uncle or godparent makes a gift of venison to their families, these occurrences are few and far between. In Potam Pueblo, with a population of approximately five thousand individuals, deer have been hunted only on a few occasions over the past few years.



**Figure 1.** Mexico deer sign. Driving through Sonora, Mexico, one encounters large metal signs of the deer dancer signifying an indigenous Mexican heritage for US tourists.



**Figure 2.** Pahko'ola Mateo Cocmea plays his sena'asom (hand rattle) at a June 2004 pahko alongside the Río Yaqui, Mexico.

And when discussing those hunts, tribal collaborators never mention a deer dance associated with the expedition. Yet deer dancing takes place every year for the Lenten *semana santa* ("Holy Week") ceremonies, for the final part of a person's funerary ceremonies, during almost every pueblo *fiesta*, as well as being part of many cultural exhibitions throughout the Americas. So why do Yoemem continue to hold rituals for almost non-existent hunts? Why does the dancing continue after deer hunting no longer sustains Yoeme culture? And, critical to my motivation in this essay, how does deer dancing offer an insight into Yoeme ethnohistory?

I describe below how deer dancing still provides sustenance for Yoeme communities, but in religious identity, rather than in hides and meat. My study then involves the combined foci of performance and religion in a particularly congruous way since Yoemem never perform the deer dance in a purely secular manner. As in many indigenous communities, Yoeme worldviews cannot be easily divided into separate spheres of religious and non-religious activities. Thus, my use of the word "religious" relies on a very broad but useful definition of the term provided by Sam Gill:

... those images, actions, and symbols that both express and define the extent and character of the world, especially those that provide the cosmic framework in which human life finds meaning and the terms of its fulfillment. We will also consider as religious those actions, processes, and symbols through which life is lived in order that it may be meaningful and purposive (Gill 1982, 11).

Strongly resonating with this definition, we can trace the role of deer dancing as a principal component of the hunting ritual. Yoemem surely understood that ritual as fulfilling an ethical requirement and establishing a dialogue with their non-human kin. Previously represented by ethnologists as "profane" entertainment, the deer dance provides a lens on indigenous Catholic syncretism. Specifically, my research into deer dancing demonstrates that historical claims of "conversion" not only fail to tell the whole story of native agency in colonial zones, but also overlook the role of indigenous performance in historically narrating a consistent and practical pre-colonial ritual logic. This essay reconsiders the use of the label "conversion," which is the act of, or instance of, converting—that is, the turning of one thing into something else. Yet the word does not differentiate in terms of the degree, extent, length of change, or why the change takes place.

I quickly learned while doing fieldwork in Yoeme communities that in order to understand their worldviews, I first had to grasp the significance of Yoeme relationships with deer. Yoeme deer dancing, in particular, is important in order to recognise how Yoemem came to terms with Catholicism during Jesuit contact, and how they continue to view their other-than-human relations with the living world around them. Drawing on Yoeme conceptions of nine overlapping *aniam* (realms or worlds of being), I interpret deer dancing ceremonies as Yoeme representations of knowledge and truth. After characterising some Yoeme attitudes on deer hunting on the basis of an analysis of ethnographic literature on the topic, I describe one particular deer dance form called *maso me'ewa* ("killing the deer"), and demonstrate how this performative act assists in providing an ethnohistorical explanation of Yoeme-Catholicism and of larger questions of religious change and continuity.

Both Jesuit documents and Yoeme oral traditions suggest that Yoemem were eager to learn new technologies in the early contact zones of New Spain, which resulted from missionary activities in some Native American homelands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As the Spanish were unable to militarily defeat the Yoemem, missionaries lived among other nearby native groups for some time before being invited by into their pueblos by Yoemem in the early seventeenth century. According to the tribe's primary myth, the people had already received prophetic knowledge that such changes were coming. Still, many ethnographers fail to acknowledge that Yoeme religiosity continues to be grounded in an aboriginal ritual logic. On the surface, many Yoeme rites seem to indicate that they had converted to Catholicism. Prominent scholars of Yoeme culture, such as Edward Spicer, Muriel Thayer Painter, and Ralph Beals, have tended to accept preconceived categories of sacred or profane, Christian or pagan, and pre-contact or post-contact. These are dichotomous terms that fail to characterise accurately Yoeme religious action. Persuaded that Yoeme dances were artistic rather than being epistemologically grounding, scholars have seldom understood the ways in which deer dancing asserts Yoeme truth-claims regarding history and identity. My own approach is that the deer-dancing ritual offers a model for understanding the manner in which Yoemem grafted the Catholic figure of Jesus onto older views of ritual sacrifice and hunting. This study then joins the work of others such as William Merrill, Kenneth Morrison, and Vicente Rafael in investigating how colonial subjects maintained aboriginal worldviews through periods of social assimilation.

### *Deer Hunting as a Mode of Sustenance*

In earlier times, Yoeme society depended greatly on hunting for its sustenance, and rabbits, peccary, badgers, raccoons, and iguanas, but most importantly deer, were hunted. The Coues whitetails (*Odocoileus virginianus couesi*), *maaso/m* in Yoeme, were the largest animals living in the Yoeme homeland, and provided the people with hides, food, and religious utensils used for healing. Yoeme hunters pursued deer with bows and arrows, snares, occasionally with fire drives, and later with rifles. According to contemporary Yoeme collaborators, other animals in the wilderness, such as rabbits, bees, and vultures, helped the deer to avoid hunters, and, conversely, sometimes seemed to have assisted the hunters to trap them. Yoeme hunting groups consisted of at least four men who bathed themselves with sage and their weapons with chilli pods, on the morning of the hunt, and who stalked the deer wearing deer masks and skin. They relied on their dogs for assistance. The men held a sharp stick in one hand and a bow in the other, while simulating the deer's foreleg movements—which enabled them to come very close to the deer. The hunters, being in such close proximity to the animal, thus had a better opportunity to kill the deer, and, according to several sources, this also enabled them learn deer language and ways. The leader of the hunt was always a man who knew deer language and who possessed *sea taka*; that is, "flower body" or "flower power." Communication laid the groundwork for a direct relationship between the hunter and the deer.

Indicative of their kinship obligations, Yoemem often linguistically refer to the deer as *saila maaso*, "little brother deer". When addressing or referring to

the governing deer, that is the leader of the deer herd, as they do when asking him for permission to hunt and kill him, Yoemem use the term *malichi* which means "fawn". Such permission is sought through the performance of deer dances the night before the hunt, which celebrates the relationships between humans and all of the other-than-human persons in the wilderness, particularly deer (see Beals 1943, 13; 1945, 13; Savala 1980, 188–90; Painter 1986, 120–1, 272–80, 282, 293–4 and 297–302; Evers and Molina 1987, 47–8, 134–5, 137–8, 142 and 150–4).

Yoemem still describe a number of practices and behaviours associated with appropriate deer–human relations. For example, I have heard during fieldwork that only Yoemem who receive positive dreams from the governing deer, or deer leader, should attempt to hunt; and even then, hunters must always ask the deer for permission before leaving the pueblo. While hunting, the men must always think good thoughts, concentrate, and yet not think too much. One should never have sexual thoughts about women, even wives, during the hunt, or else the deer may become jealous. Yoemem should not kill for sport and should never look a dying deer in the eyes, nor should a hunter blow on his food when eating on a hunting trip. [4] Failure of hunters to meet these and other obligations could lead to misfortune—something that Robert Brightman also noted in Rock Cree communities, and Robin Ridington among the Dunne-za (Brightman 1993, 196–212; Ridington 1988, 52–3). Indeed, in this context, Yoeme elders tell stories of the deer blowing tiny thorns into the hunters' eyes or bodies, of arrows (and later, bullets) turning around in mid-air and striking the hunter, of the deer hiding themselves from the hunters, of hunters never having successful hunts for the rest of their lives, or of having pains in their arms or legs.

Although only a few men continue to hunt, the form of these pre-deer hunt ceremonies can be gleaned to a certain extent from oral and performative traditions. Deer dancing can still be seen in contemporary Yoeme communities on the occasion of death anniversaries, as part of the Passion Play of Jesus on Holy Saturday, and during the festive celebration of the Saint's Day of the respective pueblos. In the Yoeme language, these dance events are called *pahkom* (singular *pahko*, "ceremony"). Just as in the actual hunting parties, a deer-dancing performance requires at least four people, consisting of one dancer and three singers. Sitting on the ground in a line, one singer plays the water drum and the other two play rasps, while singing the deer songs. The deer songs express the perspective of the deer, plants, flowers, or animal friends, in the wilderness. They thus always describe the deer's special realm; that is, the *sea ania*, or "flower world." In these rituals, the dancer (*maso ye'eme*) enters the ceremonial space—sometimes called "flower patio"—where the dance is to take place, as a young deer. As the dances continue throughout the night, singers refer to the deer dancer as an adolescent deer, and then later on as an adult deer. In the morning, the final songs will either refer to him as an old-man deer, or they will end the night's dancing by referring to him as a newborn deer. As is the case in the actual hunting practices, the deer dancer wears the head of a deer on top of his head, and he holds gourd rattles in each hand, all of which enable him to convey more effectively the deer's actions as they are described in the accompanying songs. The deer dancer is preceded into the ceremonial space by *pahko'olam* (old men of the fiesta, also known as *pascolas*), who bless the entire space, including attendees, and who entertain the people by performing as animals from the wilderness who taunt,

mimic, befriend, and sometimes hunt the deer dancer. The deer dancer must simultaneously dance the meaning of the deer songs, showing everyone the beauty of the flower world, and he must also grow old and allow himself to be the focus of verbal attacks. He is pursued and sometimes killed by the *pahko'olam*, thereby demonstrating that all existence must sacrifice so that life may continue.

Any discussion of Yoeme ritual must necessarily include references to Yoeme worldviews. Most, if not all, Yoeme ceremonial performers understand their world as dimensionally composed of overlapping, yet distinct, worlds or realms, called *aniam*. The ethnographic literature suggests that Yoemem perceive as many as nine different *aniam*, referred to, respectively, as: *tenku ania*, "dream world"; *tuka ania*, "night world"; *huya ania*, "wilderness world"; *yo ania*, "enchanted world"; *kawi ania*, "mountain world"; *vaawe ania*, "world under the water"; *teeka ania*, "from the sky up through the universe"; *nao ania*, "corn cob world"; and, as mentioned above, the *sea ania*, "flower world." [5] Yoemem might reference a number, or, indeed, all *aniam*, since the dances might have been held at night ("night world"), the dancers' abilities might have come from dreams ("dream world"), and the songs might be substantiating sea life or animals in the sky ("world under the water," "from sky up through the universe"). Each of these worlds provides a home for powerful beings or forces, but Yoemem relate deer dancing to three worlds specifically—*yo ania*, in that the deer emerges from an enchanted home; *huya ania*, in that the deer goes into the wilderness world; and finally *sea ania*, in that the deer dances for us in the flower world.

In terms of Yoeme worldviews, the *sea ania* is of fundamental importance since most community members in the southern pueblos understand flowers, *seewam*, as the actualisation of sacrifice and of the nurturing acts of giving. The most nurturing aspects of the world—streams, lakes, clouds, and rain—are found in the *sea ania*. The deer is understood to live in the *sea ania*, and when he is killed he is said to be laid "atop a bed of flowers." As noted above, hunters must have *sea taka*, or "flower power," to hunt deer successfully. Flowers adorn the deer dancer's antlers and skirt, as well as the necklaces and hair of the *pahko'olam*. In their extensive study of deer songs, Larry Evers and Felipe Molina write that the most common words found in the songs are Yoeme terms for flowers. For Molina, a well-respected Yoeme scholar and deer singer, the main purpose of the songs is to bring the deer's voice from the *sea ania* to the ceremony. He adds that, "almost every piece of regalia and every instrument used in deer dancing and deer singing may be called 'seewa' or 'sea' as well" (Evers and Molina 1987, 52).

The deer dance always entails the dancing of the *pahko'ola* (singular of *pahko'olam*). Wearing black masks in either the shape of a human-like face or of a goat's head, *pahko'olam* lead the deer dancer into the performance area where they will spend the evening dancing with him, clowning around with each other, and entertaining the guests. When not dancing with the deer dancer, *pahko'olam* wear their masks backwards or hang them from the left side of the head. Common mask designs include the elongated goat-face style with ears and horns. Mask makers often paint small insects or desert animals on the cheeks of masks. Typical Yoeme *pahko'ola* masks feature a band of small triangles pointing inward around the outside circumference, and are thought to represent goat's teeth, sunrays, or mountains. Many masks have cross-like paintings, which some people relate to Christianity, although Edward Spicer apparently interpreted them as a pre-Jesuit

contact symbol for the sun (Spicer 1958, 434–6; 1961, 31). Both the elongated and face-shaped masks have either goat-hair or horse-hair dangling over the eyes and from the chin. The ethnographic literature strongly links *pahko'olam* with goats, and with the most ancient and respected realm, the *yo ania*. Their pre-colonial beginnings are implied in their oft-used title, “old men of the fiesta,” with “old” referring to their respected or ancient quality, not their ages. Since they are also sometimes called “sons of the devil,” it is necessary to bear in mind that a minority of Christian Yoemem tend to relate the *yo ania* to concepts of evil and the devil. [6] When attending an all-night *pahko*, the banter and antics of the *pahko'olam* help to elevate the mood and energy of the crowd. The dancers are charged with handing out cigarettes to the audience, and, more often than not, they create quite a stir by attempting to humiliate the deer dancer, the musicians, the female societies to their right, and even the spectators. [7]

The ethnographic literature contains numerous descriptions of both the *pahko'olam* and the deer dances (Bogan 1925; Montell 1938, 147–58; Wilder 1963; Spicer 1980, 102–10; Evers and Molina 1987; Burton 1990, 15–32; Turner 1990; Valencia, Valencia and Spicer 1990, 99–100; Robinson 1992, 2–18; Maaso, Molina and Evers 1993; Padilla 1998, 45–54). And one rarely finds a newspaper story or journal article about Yoeme culture that does not include an account of these dancers, the music accompanying their motions, and their actual dance choreography. In the United States, these descriptions often portray the deer and *pahko'ola* dances as a southwestern native art form, or, more simply, “folk art.” Such categorisations do apply, since the dances, as with other tribal public performances, assert a sense of belonging to a specific region (if not the epitome of regional “locality”). But deer dancing as an art form also expresses a specific indigeneity, coming from somewhere else. The combination of the aboriginal figures of the *pahko'olam* and the deer, with the Catholic features of the crosses, saints, and Jesus, portrays Yoemem as border crossers on both cosmological and geopolitical levels. The dances transfer cultural roots that are themselves religiously hybrid, and, thus, while being tribally specific, they also express a history similar to those of other native groups in the borderlands. Deer dancing expresses, depending on the situations and audiences, a pre-contact religious worldview, a syncretic borderlands fusion with Spanish Catholicism, and a unique *Indio* “heritage” within Sonora regionalism.

### *Deer Dancing as Entertainment*

In his work entitled *The Yaquis: A Cultural History* (1980), Edward Spicer provocatively argues that enduring peoples share a “language of action.” His reading of that language, however, was often, and understandably, through the lens of modernist dichotomies. *The Yaquis*, Spicer’s culmination of his forty years of research on Yoeme identity, insightfully stresses the importance of ritual activity as a central factor in maintaining identity in spite of transnational and interethnic factors. On the other hand, Spicer misrepresents Yoeme understandings of ritual and identity by characterising Yoeme religion as a belief system that emerges from natural–supernatural dimensionality. Spicer also decontextualises Yoeme ritual performance by maintaining a functionalist distinction between “sacred” and “profane” ritual activities (Morrison 1992b, 207–9; Carsten 1993, 43–5; Shorter

2002, 91–2; 2003, 199). Judging from his published work, Spicer's focus on *pahko'olam* and deer dancing as "arts" has prevented him from understanding these activities as effective ritual actions. As far as he was concerned, the deer dance could no longer function as a religious activity if deer hunting no longer takes place regularly. However, to consider deer dancing solely as a non-religious (that is, profane) activity would be to miss an essential aspect of Yoeme "endurance."

Unfortunately, Spicer's functionalist approach and assertions have been influential, and they have led the anthropologist Robert Redfield, for example, to state that:

It is shown that one ceremonial institution, the deer-dancer, having no meaning except the old connection with hunting, is becoming simply secular entertainment, and thus, inadequately supported by functional value, tends to disappear altogether (Spicer 1984, xiv). [8]

Spicer later acknowledged that the initial acts of cultural revival for the Yoemem in Arizona were, in fact, the deer dances and the masses for the dead (1988, 259). Yet, he never reconsidered his serious claim that *pahkom* were fading in importance:

We have seen that the deer-dancer, while still a participant in ceremony, is surrounded by secular attitudes. His appearance depends on conditions dictated by personal considerations. A *fiestero* may feel that he does not want to spend the money necessary for the food for the dancer and his musicians, or the deer-dancer himself may not care to dance. Nothing will happen to anyone if the latter does not appear. He is not an essential in the ceremonial pattern. The deer-dancer's activities are, furthermore, gradually being disassociated from those of the *pascolas*. As this happens, his connection with those aspects of the culture which are supernaturally sanctioned—the church organizations—becomes very tenuous. He is gradually becoming simply an entertainer (Spicer 1984, 298–9).

As far as Redfield and Spicer were concerned, the function of deer hunting had undoubtedly diminished as a primary cultural activity of Yoeme life. Spicer, however, did not always appreciate how these deer dances had been, and remained, central to sustaining Yoeme religious identity. [9] Although he was aware of the importance of the dances to collective ethnic symbolism, his functionalist (and Eliadian) view of ritual led him to portray deer dancing as having become entertainment.

The second most famous ethnographer of Yoeme worldview, Muriel Thayer Painter, has much to offer on the meaning of *pahko'ola* and deer dancing, although she, like her teacher Spicer, understands the dancers as being primarily entertainers. Painter's work, *With Good Heart* (1986), offers a rich compilation of Yoeme interpretations and interviews that derive from almost forty years of collaboration with Arizona Yoemem. Painter devotes a chapter, entitled "The Native Dancers," to the lore, practices, regalia, and powers associated with *pahko'ola* and deer dancing. She makes insightful if slightly survivalist comments about those two dance groups, noting that they are "a profoundly important part in the life of Pascua," and also observes that:

it is in discussing these two groups with informants, watching and listening to them at fiestas, that one gets a glimpse, however fragmentary, of the world before the padres made their contributions to Yaqui culture (Painter 1986, 241).

Additionally, Painter's chapter offers over fifty pages of Yoeme voices, telling her about what *pahko'ola* and deer dancing mean. Although informants are continually quoted, Painter's interpretations frame the discussion, and usually both introduce and conclude her extended quotes. Her interpretation of the events tends to override Yoeme interpretations of their own culture. Despite her collaboration with Yoemem, Painter, like Spicer, assumes that Yoeme religiosity is essentially a belief-system that makes oppositional distinctions between pre-Christian and Christian-Yoeme views. Moreover, one can see in her text that her Yoeme collaborators' statements do not always support Painter's conclusions. [10]

Painter's interpretation of these performances is evident in her concluding remarks on the respective dancers. Her views are in line with Spicer's comprehension of the *pahko'olam* as being fundamentally "profane" clowns who dance in order to retain the crowd's interest in them (Spicer 1980, 94). Yet, Painter wavers on her own ability to make such claims. Of the *pahko'ola*, she states that "... it is true that he has been given a function in the ceremonies, although primarily as an entertainer and ceremonial host" (Painter 1986, 271). She then ends her section on the *pahko'ola* several sentences later, almost defending the previous statement with an interpretive disclaimer: "it is difficult to obtain a precise statement as to the deeper meanings and derivation of the *pascola* role" (*ibid.* 272). Painter supplies the reader with many Yoeme views about *pahko'ola* dancing (*ibid.* 282–305), but in her own interpretative framework surrounding those "insider" voices, she implies that *pahko'olam* are important to Yoeme ritual only as clowns.

Painter points towards ritual efficacy without fully appreciating the importance of a performative approach for an understanding of contemporary Native American cultures when she says that, "... it is only with the deer that the *pascolas* can recreate the ancient world, remembered in dance, mimetic dramatization, and in the words of the ancient deer songs." In her assessment of Yoeme dancing, she concludes that:

there appears to be no way to determine how important in earlier days the deer songs and dances were merely as entertainment. They have been continued after the ritual function has fallen into disuse (Painter 1986, 299).

Painter here rehearses a crucial problem in the study of Native American ritual activity. Her approach precludes the possibility of discovering how Yoemem value entertainment as having a religious perspective, by suggesting that (*pahko'ola*) dancing should no longer be conceived as efficacious ritual performance.

The effect of such thinking, as Sam Gill warns, "is to distract us from understanding the full religious importance of clowns" (1982, 95). As Gill was addressing the interpretation of clowns, ceremonial hosts, and masked dancers who use humour in indigenous ceremonies, his comments are directly relevant to *pahko'olam*, and offer an alternative interpretation to those provided by Spicer and Painter. Whereas the latter authors have viewed *pahko'olam* as having evolved into entertainers within deer dances, Gill argues that most clowns balance the evocation of fear with that of humour. The uses made of the cross by *pahko'ola* dancers, their often vulgar actions, their dancing with, and their sometimes killing of the deer, their ability to make us laugh and to instil fear with threats of public embarrassment, support Gill's claim that clowning embodies a mastery of symbolic inversion. "As a consequence," he writes, "ritual clowns commonly have

the powers to heal, to bring luck in hunting and war, and to assure fertility in plants, animals, and human beings" (*ibid.* 96). The contrast is clear, and Painter's and Spicer's readers would be left to assume that Yoemem may have originally danced *pahko'ola* for real, life-changing reasons, but "that was then," and now they perform merely to provide a humorous spectacle. An approach closer aligned to Gill's would illustrate not only the humour and art of the *pahko'olam*, but their power and ritual accomplishments.

### *Dancing as Knowing*

Like most indigenous ritual, the Yoeme deer dance is centrally concerned with space, both physical and cosmological. Since the deer dancer is thought to embody the original deer, Evers and Molina have written that deer songs place Yoeme listeners in direct relation with their collective past. In their examination of deer songs, they refer to both group identity, and group survival:

The deer songs are regarded as one of the most essential expressions of what it is to remain Yaqui after four and one-half centuries of attempts to destroy their communities and to dissolve them as a people. The continuance of Yoeme deer songs is thus directly related to Yoeme memories of their history and survival as a people (Evers and Molina 1987, 19).

The two authors bring the study of Yoeme culture to an ethnographic highpoint by combining comprehensive translations, rich cultural interpretations, field notes, and many Yoeme voices in their work. Their description of Yoeme poetics relies on local understandings of history as formed and performed through deer songs.

Evers and Molina clearly move beyond seeing these activities as solely "profane" entertainment, and challenge us to consider how deer and *pahko'ola* dancing offer the community insights into Yoeme religious history. Yoeme ritual performances are occasions during which to share memories and establish a collective identity, bonding old and young. By focusing on the spaces and places remembered again and again in Yoeme ritual activity, Yoemem combine Catholicism and indigenous Yoeme knowledge in order to maintain a singing and blossoming worldview. By dissolving the hermeneutic dichotomy between Catholic sacrality and profane native arts—a distinction that informed the works of earlier writers such as Spicer and Painter—we see emerging a particularly Yoeme form of historicising the dynamic of collaboration with the Jesuits centuries earlier. For example, during the deer dance, *pahko'olam* inscribe crosses on the ground, while invoking as saints the names of animals important to aboriginal life. These inscriptions demarcate the performance space as well as the place of sharing collective identity. They provide a context by which to better understand Yoeme concepts of ritual theory and epistemology, since the symbol of the cross literally becomes de-symbolised and actually embodied with agency.

*Pahko'ola* behaviour is a purposeful means of establishing, transmitting, and reinforcing the ultimate values of Yoeme culture, while appearing to make light of them. Molina emphasises this point when he explains that a *moro* ("ritual leader") will lead the *pahko'olam* into the *pahko santo heka* ("ritual dance area") because "they are not humans at this time." Molina adds, "They started to say things that popped into their minds—crazy things, because they were still on the side of the Devil." In these ways we understand that *pahko'olam* are different beings—

they become “over there,” in a place of otherness. Asking his grandfather why they sometimes shouted, Molina was told, “this was because they were trying to scare and frighten away the Devil, who was lurking in the area round the fiesta ground” (Evers and Molina 1987, 83). Molina then adds that the *pahko’olam* created a space for the *pahko* to begin:

They stood toward the east, home of the Texans, and they asked for help from *santo mocho’okoli* (holy horned toad). Each *pahko’ola* marked a cross on the ground with the bamboo reed with which the *moro* had led him into the ramada. Then they stood toward the north and said: “Bless the people to the north, the Navajos, and help me, my *santo vovok* (holy frog), because they are people like us,” and they marked another cross on the ground. Still they stood toward the west and said, “Bless the *Hua Yoemem* (Papagos) and help me my *santo wikui* (holy lizard),” and they marked another cross on the ground. Finally they stood toward the south and said: “To the south, land of the Mexicans, bless them and help me my *santo vehori* (holy tree lizard),” and they marked the last cross on the ground. The head *pahko’ola* said: “My holy crosses, we have marked you on the ground so that you can protect us from all evil that might harm us.” ... Now that the ground had been blessed and purified, the *pahko* was ready to begin. The deer dancer would arrive shortly, and the people were ready to enjoy and be blessed by the *pahko* (Evers and Molina 1987, 83–4).

Molina’s description of *pahko’olam* spatialising the *pahko santo* enables us to understand ritual performance as actual social transformation, as opposed to “simply secular entertainment.” The *pahko’olam* ask the “holy” animals to bless the neighbouring cultures, the men bless the ground in the four directions with crosses, and this act of inscription then protects the *pahko’olam* from evil. [11] Since the *pahko’olam* directly address the crosses, we know that the crosses in the ground are not representational, but, rather, efficacious embodiments with their own fruitful concerns. The dancers also bless the ground with these crosses, who then have the ability to return the blessing. We might even regard these inscriptions as being ironic since the inscribers of the crosses are already ontologically “over there,” and yet they are creating a boundary where the “over there” is a safe place. Thus, in these ways they are deliberately working effectively with otherness. We also see here that the *pahko’olam* are creating forms that exercise intentionality and power. Molina also informs us that the entire *pahko* then blesses the people who come to enjoy the *pahko*. In these words, Molina demonstrates the power of ritual, the importance of spatialising, the community of beings in a Yoeme cosmos, and the religious significance of “entertainment.”

Molina’s description also highlights the hybrid and syncretic character of Yoeme worldviews. By referring to the Devil, Molina shows that the beings of the Christian hierarchy inform appropriate Yoeme actions and morals. Such a view is further clarified by the *pahkolam* wishing to be protected “from all evil.” The question remains, however, as to how holy frogs, lizards and horned toads, are to be understood. Clearly, the hierarchy of beings is more inclusive than in an orthodox Roman Catholic cosmology. Moreover, the fact that the dancers address the crosses directly, and understand them as having agency to bless and protect, suggests a non-symbolic notion of ritual inscription. The crosses do not refer to a signified power or deity. Rather, their ontological status demonstrates a Yoeme theory of ritual that is evident in the saying of prayers over meals, cross greetings, and throughout other deer and *pahko’ola* dances. The *pahkolam* write on the ground to make a place different from other places, a place where the various Yoeme *aniam*

can be available, where history can be re-membered, identity developed, and flower shared. The embodied dancing and singing creates a powerful relationship between the performance space and all who come to the *pahko*.

I have relied on Molina's description to demonstrate that Yoeme worldviews, for many, cannot be easily condensed into either a sacred–profane dichotomy, or a Catholic description of Heaven, Hell, and the human saints. While each village church is a place for Mass and religious processions, the mountains, and the wilderness world, still provide the community with transformative power. The deer dance takes, and makes, place wherever it is performed. The *pahko'olam* create a safe space, and yet they are associated with the Devil (by some) and with the little desert friends of the deer (by most). The *aniam* are present to the performers and audience. And, as I show below, Yoeme concepts of knowledge and truth are often bound more to these songs and dances than to the Bible or scholarly histories.

### *Deer Dancing as Mission History*

Indigenous ceremonial performances offer historical narratives that often run counter to tropes of conversion. Anthropologists have frequently sought to explain native people's conversions with concepts such as "assimilation," "acculturation," "syncretism," or "fusion." William Taylor describes how three main processes—"pagan" resistance, syncretism, or Christian transformation—have been hypothesised regarding Indian religious change in Mesoamerica, although his claim is applicable to other regions as well (Taylor 1996, 51–62). Due to what Ashis Nandy (1983) considers the implicit metaphor of conquest, scholars commonly assume that transformation wins out. Still, many scholars, including Nandy, work from the position that there was a "shared culture" of colonialism. According to Taylor, this scholarship acknowledges the accommodation and appropriation, not just submission, linking the colonised and coloniser (Taylor 1996, 6). [12] Or, as is evident in William Merrill's ethnographic study of the *Rarāmuri* worldview, newer religious forms are often adopted to some extent, although not at the expense of a core of indigenous cosmology (Merrill 1988, 79–84). At the very least, culture change is a conversation toward both collective and competing goals. When writing about acculturation and assimilation, we can choose to posit syncretism and hybridity over models of either simple resistance or transformation. By doing so, people see their own agency in the emergence of new cultural forms as well as in the continuation of endemic logic.

Taylor demonstrates multiple ways in which various scholars of colonial New Spain have pursued syncretic models. Taylor notes that, according to Jorge J. Klor de Alva (1982) and Miguel León-Portilla (1990), the majority of native groups borrowed just enough Christian symbolism to appear converted (Taylor 1996, 53). Taylor also notes that, arising from his study of the Maya, William Madsen (1957) spoke of two kinds of syncretism—one in which symbols or god-figures were added without deep change taking place, and another in which emotions and beliefs actually experienced change. The recognition of these two forms of change was instructive for Madsen in his work among the Maya. As a result, he came to the conclusion that this native group did not change its core religious values during missionary instruction. As with the Yoemem, the Maya were relatively

isolated for almost a century with only a few Jesuits working in their territory. Although Taylor finds Madsen's differentiation between deep and surface change instructive, he has also criticised Madsen for not giving credit to the parish priests and Jesuits for their roles as insightful and accommodating interpreters of the Catholic faith (Taylor 1996, 55–7).

Taylor notes that, like Madsen, Nancy Farriss, who also worked with the Maya, retained the language of syncretism, while adding to that notion a sense of layered convergence (Farriss 1984, 57). Farriss tones down the difference between deep and shallow change, but demonstrates how the Maya merged their indigenous worldview with Catholic deities and saints forming a "creative synthesis." Farriss joins Madsen in representing the Maya as moving toward a Christian identity without "conversion." Farriss argues that the three main factors that enabled this situation to emerge were the lack of Spanish encroachment deep into Maya territory during the first century of Jesuit relations, the small numbers of Jesuits present, and their sense of necessary indigenous moulding of doctrine. Although the missionary conditions expressed by Farriss and Madsen were much different to what natives encountered in southern and central Mexico, the Yucatan experiences are important here since their geohistorical contexts are similar to the Yoeme example.

Because both Madsen and Farriss downplay the internal native agency and logic that clearly must inform any reading of "conversion," I will return to the Yoemem by way of more promising scholarship. I wish to specifically mention the works of Inga Clendinnen, Elizabeth Wilder Weismann, and Kenneth Morrison, who interpret cultural change as reflecting a coherent indigenous sensibility and intelligence. Clendinnen (1987, 154–60) finds that some colonial native groups in Central Mexico appropriated only those aspects of Catholicism that seemed appropriate within their pre-existing religious logic—for example, the adoption of saints as other-than-human intercessors, or Mary as a powerful feminine embodiment of fertility. Weismann (1985) reaches a similar conclusion in her study of Central Mexican indigenous art, asserting that the Indians adopted those Christian practices that were familiar to, or even strengthened, pre-contact religious ideas. For both authors, Catholic drama in ceremonies and myth provided local tribes with additional means of expressing and thus of continuing non-European worldviews. While both authors seem attached to uncritical notions of "the sacred" and "deities," Taylor rightfully considers Clendinnen's and Weismann's works to be exemplary studies as they focus on religious change under colonialism, without utilising common concepts of substitution, imposition, and loss. Taylor gives credit to these two authors for opening "the possibility that Indians innovated in order to maintain the familiar" (1996, 61). In this way, we can come closer to understanding native responses to colonial mission as being, in William K. Power's words, "logical transformations based on earlier cultural context" (1987, 124).

As an ethnohistorian of native colonial encounters and their effects on indigenous religiosity, Kenneth Morrison provides an eloquent description of, and direct assault on, the widespread use of "conversion" in both colonial and mission histories. Describing the intersection of seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century eastern Algonkian and French-Catholic cosmologies, Morrison demonstrates that religious change need not mean "conversion":

The main problem with conversion is that it stipulates a particular and singular outcome to religious encounter. To describe eastern Algonkian religious change as conversion is to fail to understand that change itself is a process, and particularly a process of discerning, negotiating, making, and adapting religious meaning. The category conversion is intimately related to the pervasive view that Native American history proceeds in terms of victimization and cultural decline, and in terms of non-Indian views of a universal, progressive, and Christian history (2002, 33–4).

Morrison's work calls for more nuanced interpretations of cultural exchanges and transformations. He holds that religious change did occur in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but he is also correct to doubt the usefulness of the label "conversion" in that context. Morrison's conviction is persuasive:

Conversion claims that Native Americans came to agree with pervasive and aggressive critiques of their cultures and lifeways. Conversion denies that either pre- or post-contact Native American cultures had or have systematic and rational integrity. Conversion contends that Native Americans themselves perceived the superior truth claims of Christianity as a series of over-arching theological and cultural propositions about the nature of reality. Conversion claims that Native Americans repudiated their religious traditions, and thus their way of perceiving, thinking, valuing, and acting. Conversion concludes that Native Americans turned away from ancient truth, and moved toward a system which offered them a morally better, and intellectually more effective, way of understanding the world. Conversion stipulates that Christianity proclaims a new truth by which Native Americans could understand an unprecedented, post-contact world. In all these ways, conversion is a problematic category, and one that fails utterly to understand the distinctive and integral character of Native American life both before and after contact (2002, 33–4).

Morrison challenges us to engage more carefully with the epistemological systems from which natives were reasoning, and the values on which they relied, to decide which cultural changes were practical. He appears to justify then an abandonment of the term "conversion" in those cases of culture contact that appear not to entail a consummate exchange of values.

We might put this another way. If, as Vicente Rafael writes (1993, xvii), conversion entails "the act of winning someone's voluntary submission" and the "restructuring of his or her desires as well," then we have no reason to believe that Yoemem converted to Catholicism in the seventeenth century. From what we can tell—using previous ethnographic accounts as well as Yoeme ritual and myth as evidence—Yoemem adopted (as one would adopt a child) Catholic personae and associated relations into their still-visible and still-sensible religious worldview.

Of course, deer dancing and *pahko'olam* are just a few embodied claims by which to counter the comments of one historian of Yoeme missionisation, who stated: "Jesuits proceeded to stamp out what they considered to be heathen customs" (Hu-DeHart 1981, 32). Spicer, on the other hand, describes the conditions that placed Yoeme in control of their "directed cultural change." Yoemem in the seventeenth century had been inspecting Jesuit missions south of their own territory for years before inviting the Jesuits into their homeland in 1616. One year later, Father Andrés Pérez de Ribas arrived with another missionary, Tomás Basilio, and four Zaque Indian converts who spoke a mutually intelligible language to Yoeme. As was Jesuit custom at the time, no military escort was requested, nor was one provided, for their stay in Yoeme territory. Although Pérez de Ribas left after a year for a higher position in the Society of Jesus, four other

missionaries replaced him. Spicer highlights the fact that in the next century of Jesuit presence, no more than six missionaries at a time were living within the Yoeme villages. This low ratio of Jesuits to Yoemem is of primary importance.

In order to understand Yoeme religious change in the seventeenth century, it is necessary to account for the dynamics of Jesuit instruction. If, as many historians state, the Yoeme population in the mid-1600s was around thirty thousand, then there were, at least, about five thousand Yoemem per Jesuit. Since this period also entailed the process of consolidating the more than eighty Yoeme *rancherías* into eight pueblos, there were clearly some pueblos without constant Jesuit presence. We know that the Jesuits managed their project by developing a programme to train *temastianes*; that is, Yoeme church assistants. These locals were the first to learn the Catholic prayers and would assist in communicating the Jesuit message to the other community members. According to Spicer, the villagers would only see the Jesuits at Sunday Mass or at the large, collective ceremonies (1961, 440). Thus, the primary work of translating Catholicism to the people fell upon the *temastianes*, of which there were never more than twenty (Spicer 1980, 21). Spicer was of the opinion that this mediation process on the part of a small group of Yoemem, still residing with kin groups in the villages, remains the important factor in order to understand how Yoemem actively adopted some new religious forms, but not necessarily their meanings (1961, 33).

From Spicer's point of view, the ratio of Yoemem to Jesuits, the role of the *temastianes*, and the absence of any non-Jesuit Spanish in Yoeme communities for over a century enabled Yoemem to pick and choose what parts of Catholicism resonated with pre-contact worldviews (1958, 434–8; 1980: 20–1, 60 and 62). The cross provides a telling example of this. Looking back over two hundred years, Spicer writes that Yoemem somehow seemed very receptive to the cross. But, despite Jesuit intentions, they referred to the cross as "our mother" and, placing her in a dress with ornamentation, they celebrated her at their spring festival (Spicer 1958, 434–6; 1961, 31). Spicer suggests that the cross may have been used before Jesuit contact in 1617, because, when Pérez de Ribas first arrived, he was greeted by a large gathering of Yoemem, each of whom held small crosses (Spicer 1961, 31). Moreover, from watching the interplay between references to the church and the *huya ania*, or wilderness world, Spicer labels the religious change as one of "oppositional integration," where the Yoemem were offered "alternatives" to their existing religion (1961, 29–30; 1980, 70).

Continuing Spicer's line of reasoning, we can return to contemporary deer and *pahko'ola* dances to see how Yoeme ceremonial integration attests to a critical and practical response to Jesuit alternatives. These rituals and their embodiments within the larger ceremonial calendar demonstrate the Yoeme adoption of Catholic alternatives into a still-visibly indigenous religious logic. In these contemporary performances, we can learn from Yoemem themselves about Yoeme reception and materialisation of Catholicism. After weeks of preparing for Easter, and of slowly dramatising the passion of Mary and Jesus in Lent, the narrative climaxes in the defeat of evil and the triumph of Jesus.

Spatially, the deer and *pahko'olam* are at the centre of that ritual. When the villagers and spectators leave the church and plaza, they follow the deer and *pahko'olam* back towards the everyday, towards their homes, and towards the desert. This movement is one of return, and also of sustenance. We can see that

Yoeme identity is sustained through the embodiment of Yoeme relations to Jesus, Mary, deer, and to other living beings. Such relations are aptly defined by the Yoeme concepts of “flower.”

In his comprehensive analysis of flower symbolism in Yoeme culture, Morrison demonstrates how their understanding of flowers as reciprocating sacrifice provides Yoemem with an indigenous theory of ritual power, by which they integrated Catholic cosmology and Christian ceremonial performances into their worldview. In his essay, “Sharing the Flower: A Non-Supernaturalist Theory of Grace,” Morrison (1992b) works against a wide and deep disciplinary current of Eliadian influence in the study of religion. [13] Working specifically outside of sacred–profane and natural–supernatural binaries, Morrison shows the pervasiveness of flower symbolism, not only in relation to Yoeme conceptions of the deer and *pahko’ola*, but also concerning ideas about God, Mary, Jesus, the saints, and ceremonial labour. He explains how Yoemem understood Christian dimensionality within pre-existing terms of ritual sacrifice and shared responsibility among all cosmic beings. Since most of the previous ethnographers of Yoeme culture dichotomised Yoeme ritual into foreign notions of sacred–profane, supernatural, worship, or belief, Morrison’s examination of flowers brings us closer to understanding Yoeme Catholic identity. His analysis of the concept of “flower” as a non-supernaturalistic theory of grace exemplifies the way Yoeme ritual, regardless of its Catholic characteristics, proceeds from a commitment to other-than-human kinship. Morrison’s explanation of Yoeme ritual theory can help us to think about deer dancing and its continuation, within a ceremonial calendar that seemingly emphasises Christian devotion more so than a hunting culture.

Yoemem explain their conceptions of Christianity through their stories of Jesus living in the Río Yaqui and their portrayals of his life and death during the Easter ceremonies. For Jesus to come to earth as a man, God enlisted the help of the stars, sun, moon, and planets, providing a Yoeme ethic of cosmic sharing and reliance on others. His birth came about only because Mary found a flower in the river while collecting water and she placed it in her bosom in order to walk home and share the flower’s beauty with Joseph. In stories of Jesus as a man, Yoemem describe him as walking in the *huya ania*, out in the wilderness, healing people among the flowers. Although he was hot, thirsty, and tired, he had the self-discipline to keep walking and to keep helping people. When he became frustrated with the world and wanted to kill everyone, his mother told him that he could only do so if he returned the breast milk that he had taken from her when he was a child. In this way, she taught him that humanity relies on giving. And when he was about to be killed by the soldiers, Mary left for the wilderness and transformed herself into a tree so that an unknowing Joseph would cut her down and make her into a cross. Some Yoemem say that she opened up her arms in the shape of a cross and that her sacrifice for him enabled them both to ascend to heaven. And when Jesus was nailed to the cross, the blood that flowed from his wounds hit the ground and sprouted into flowers. For all of these reasons, Yoemem sometimes refer to Jesus as “flower person.” They relate to him and Mary in the terms of ethical behaviour and sacrificial reciprocity.

Jesus’ giving of himself for others is further evident in the Easter ceremonies in which Yoemem portray Jesus during the first weeks of Lent as a baby without a

home, then as a young man, and then during Holy Week as an old man. Towards the end of the “big week,” the old man is literally chased around the pueblos and surrounding wilderness by the “soldiers” and by masked “big head” monsters that seek his death. In the large Lenten processions that take place first weekly, then on a daily basis, and, lastly, day and night during the last few days of Lent, Yoemem carry statues of the saints and the Marys (Mary Magdelene, the Virgin Mary, and Our Lady of Guadalupe) while the *fariseos* (Pharisees) and masked men follow in pursuit of Jesus, embodied by the old man. [14] The army, out to find Jesus, finally catch him in a garden constructed of willow branches, called Gethsemane. They bring him on horseback around the church plaza so that others can mock him and tease him, and they tie him to a post and whip him. The old man’s role is then replaced by a huge crucifix from which hangs the corpus of Jesus, covered with a white cloth. When they finish acting out the nailing of the corpus of Jesus to the cross, they lift it and the figure, still covered with a white cloth, and flowers that were wrapped in its folds fall to the ground beneath where Jesus now hangs. The *fariseos* and masked others, who are clearly happy at the “crucifixion,” move him inside the church and lay the corpus upon a bed of flowers. During the night, the body of Jesus disappears from under the big noses of the masked guards. On the morning of Holy Saturday, the *fariseos* and other masked ones use a series of processional formations and intensifying staccato rhythms to rush the church repeatedly. As protectors of the church and the saints inside, *anhelitom* (“little angels,” children dressed as beautiful angels) whip these “evil” aggressors with willow twigs and chase them out of the church. After the last assault, the black curtain—which had cut off the front quarter from the rest of the church—is thrown wide open to reveal all the *anhelitom* and saints. Christ has risen, the tomb is empty, and the *anhelitom* chase the defeated aggressors out of the church for the last time. One of the ceremonial societies of Mary, called *matachinis*, play their music and dance flowers for her, holding flower wands and wearing flower hats. The *pahko’olam* dance first in the church, then, moving outside the front doors, they dance around the “flower patio.” Because the deer is dancing and flowers are everywhere, we know that the performers are successfully presenting *sea ania*—the beautiful world of sacrifice and communion—to us. The onlookers throw confetti flowers at the attacking “soldiers.” For what seems like hours, multicoloured flowers drifting on the wind shower down upon the community. After the whole community defeats evil, fireworks shoot into the sky heralding Saint Michael’s return to heaven, since he has collected everyone’s flowers that they shared through their ceremonial labour during the previous months. [15]

It might be assumed from this description of Holy Saturday, that Yoemem simply added the pre-contact deer and *pahko’ola* dances to the Catholic ceremonial calendar; or deer dancing might be interpreted as a metaphor for the life and divine role of Jesus Christ, as the Yoemem were taught about them by the Jesuits. Clearly, I have described deer-dancing rituals and the Yoeme performance of Christ’s passion in ways that suggest comparison: the hunt, the sacrifice, the worlds or *aniam* involved in the ceremonies, the shared components of flower, and so forth. I have come to learn, however, that while the comparisons seem evident, the causal relationship between Yoeme views of Jesus and deer must also be borne in mind.

Deer dancing, as a pre-hunting ritual, demonstrates Yoeme–deer reciprocity and an acknowledgment of their mutual sacrifice. Deer dancing, as a contemporary mode of collective identity formation, demonstrates community survival in the face of persecution. Additionally, these hunting rituals bring together a very large body of indigenous Yoeme religious views, including the deer songs as other-than-human language, the *aniam* as real and present geographical transformation, the interplay with *pahko'olam* as kinship relations, and, of course, flower symbolism as cosmic and communitarian give and take. Seen in this larger frame, Yoeme–deer relations provide a pre-existent logic by which Jesuit stories of Jesus, as well as a history of colonial dynamics with the Mexican Government, can be understood. My research thus supports the claims of Evers and Molina, who note that any parallels drawn between deer and “lamb of God” are basically non-Yoeme interpretations (1987, 129). I would add that the parallel confuses the poetics with the politics of representation. To say that Yoeme communities perform the killing of the deer as a native passion play suggests that an axiological shift, a missionary success story, took place in Yoeme communities. To contend, however, that Yoemem understand Christian consciousness because they already understood human–animal relations as being powerful, familial, and epistemologically grounding, enables us to recognise an indigenous logic that was neither turned into something else nor “converted.”

### Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay I asked why Yoemem continue to perform deer-hunting ceremonies when their sustenance activities minimally include deer hunts. I believe that deer and *pahko'olam* survive because they nourish Yoeme senses of self through grounded, embodied ritual action. These performances document a particular history of syncretic traditionalism through both Catholic references and aboriginal ritual logic. Studying such performances as efficacious community auto-ethnohistory enables us to better understand how previous interpretations reflect modernist anthropological impulses. In relation to Yoemem in particular, when it is realised that they understood Jesus in terms of a deer figure, and not *vice versa*, it becomes possible to see how the concept of “conversion” fails to adequately represent Yoeme history. [16]

We might also use this Yoeme case study as a call for further research on how aboriginal hunting practices and modes of sustenance have informed both ethical views on social relationships, as well as indigenous responses to Christian notions of grace, the supernatural, divinity, worship, religion, and so forth. We might find that hunting represents what it means to be human. We might also learn that other native communities continue their hunting ceremonies in some form because, like the deer and *pahko'ola* dances, these rituals signify the essential characteristics of collective identity, the basic ideas of traditional cosmology, and an internal means of ritualistically “writing” one’s place in the landscape. [17]

Edward Spicer and Muriel Thayer Painter both interpret the deer and *pahko'olam* dancing as entertainment, thus constituting profane activities within the larger, sacred, Catholic ceremonial system of the Yoeme. In order to achieve a more contextual understanding of Yoeme ritual activity, I have shown some of the problems that result from categorising culture within modernist binaries.

I have also wanted to show the complexity of notions of “conversion” within native mission histories. I developed these approaches after asking how Yoeme ritual was communicating knowledge of collective history, and thus ethnic identity.

In the Yoeme case, it bears repeating that the “killing of the deer” dance that I described is only one set of deer songs, among hundreds of others. Deer and *pahko'olam* rituals are part of a larger corpus of meaningful religious actions. As I have suggested, the range of expressed Yoeme religiosity is wide enough to include among others, agnostics, devout Protestants, and a multitude of Catholicisms, with each individual relating to *pahkom* differently. In every Yoeme pueblo, I have noticed that some Yoeme men and women of all ages seem to be apathetic to the dances. But these people are always in a minority as most Yoemem speak of deer dancing as being central to tribal identity. Moreover, we can see how deer and *pahko'ola* dancing provide a striking example of Yoeme epistemology.

In a co-authored article entitled “‘Like this it stays in your hands’: Collaboration and Ethnopoetics,” Felipe Molina writes that he has come to know ritual in his community as *lutu'uria*; that is, as the “knowledge about living in the Yaqui world that, by virtue of being in the memories of respected community members, is considered to be central” (Evers and Molina 1998, 26–7). Molina draws upon Spicer’s description of *lutu'uria* as belonging to those who demonstrate the “highest of all human qualities” since they spend their entire lives committing themselves to the fulfillment of Yoeme religious obligations (Spicer 1980, 85). Molina then specifies that such obligations are nothing less than Yoeme ceremonial participation. Clearly, *lutu'uria* is knowledge that is socially constructed. Molina further explains:

There is then a sense in which the *pahko* becomes the kind of ‘proving ground’ . . . Subsequent performances during the ceremonies in the towns will be the occasion for this knowledge to be recognized and validated (Evers and Molina 1998, 27).

Molina directs our attention to a type of knowledge that we might recognise in other indigenous cultures, namely social knowledge. His description of the ritual performance of knowledge also supports a central promise of performance studies; that is, that we move our bodies in ways that shape what and how we know, or what Nancy Hartsock has called “standpoint epistemology” (1984, 231–4; 1987, 204–6). Providing a community-based definition of knowledge and a social method of verification, Molina’s description of *lutu'uria* demonstrates how deer and *pahko'ola* rituals provide Yoeme communities with a veritable historicism.

Although the inscription process takes (and makes) place through non-literate acts, *pahko'olam* differentiate Catholic and Yoeme personae, dimensions, and ways of knowing—effectively, these acts are performed ethnographies of a certain Yoeme lifeworld that many community members consciously engage with as their tribal identity. If these histories and interpretations of Yoeme culture lack western or historically academic notions of “documentation” or anthropologically verifiable “data,” then we know that the rituals are fulfilling at least one purpose; that is, “the *pahko* is a place where an opposition between knowledge gained in the towns and knowledge gained in the mountains is negotiated” (Evers and Molina 1998, 27). Yoeme community knowledge—indeed, a Yoeme epistemology—from

the times of Jesuit contact until now, is clearly sustained through the negotiation of ritual.

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### *Notes*

- [1] To see video clips and many of the images—the deer dance, the *pahko'ola* dances, the deer-dancing symbol in Mexican popular culture—associated with this essay, please refer to the author's website "Vachiam Eecha: Planting the Seeds" (<http://hemi.nyu.edu/eng/cuaderno.shtml>).
- [2] The Yoeme Indians are more widely known as "Yaqui" or the "Yaquis." I use "Yoeme" since my collaborators refer to themselves in their own language as "Yoeme" (plural, "Yoemem"). The terms "Yaqui" and "Yaquis" are retained in direct quotes and references. In this paper I have usually given the plural form (with the addition of an "m" of Yoemi words). Evidenced throughout the rest of the paper, most Yoeme words are pluralised with the addition of an "m" at the end of the word.
- [3] As with all fieldwork, mine is particularly situated within a certain network of collaboration and resistance. I work primarily in Barrio Santamea of Potam Pueblo, the largest and most central among the Yoeme pueblos in Sonora, Mexico. I began my field research in 1992 and I have continued to visit since then. My personal relationships with collaborators have developed over time, from that of researcher, student, to ceremonial kin, friend, and patron. My collaborators are fieldworkers, elders, ritual specialists, and teachers. They are mostly men and all at least bilingual.
- [4] Muriel Thayer Painter collected numerous warnings and requirements regarding deer-human relationships, many of them analogous to curers who transmit power through their eyes and do not blow on hot medicines (1986, 272–80).
- [5] For reasons of the scope of this essay and community privacy, I do not describe here the *tenku ania*, *tuka ania*, *kawi ania*, *vawe ania*, *teeka ania*, or *nao ania* (the latter being the corn cob world accessed for witchery).
- [6] Yoeme religiosity, as with other worldviews, allows for a wide range of perspectives. See Shorter (2002, 63–4) for a detailed description of how various community members have come to represent "aboriginal" life-ways as being less-Catholic and, therefore, immoral.

- [7] The *pahko'ola regalia* are analysed in depth in Robinson (1992). For descriptions of the female societies, see Painter (1986, 143–50) and Erickson (2000, 227–52).
- [8] For more information on how Redfield, Spicer's thesis director, came to the quoted conclusion, see Edward H. Spicer, letter to Robert Redfield, 11 February 1940, "Unprocessed Correspondence between Edward Spicer and Robert Redfield" (Spicer 1942b).
- [9] Spicer's interpretations may have reflected a comment that Juan Valenzuela made one afternoon in conversation: "The pascolas don't come from the people of the enchantment. They just make jokes about coming from somewhere before they begin to dance" (Spicer 1942a). After spending, by this point, thirty years working in Yoeme communities, Spicer may not have recognised when his questions continued to be eluded.
- [10] James Clifford notes: "Polyphonic works are particularly open to readings not specifically intended" (1988, 52).
- [11] The types of animals addressed vary among *pahko'olam*. The practice of addressing these animals supports dialogic relations with the wilderness world. In this case, particularly, lizards, toads, and other desert animals that walk close to the ground may be addressed due to their close connection with bringing rain in Yoeme cosmology. Personal conversation with Herminia Valenzuela and Felipe S. Molina, 21 June 1996.
- [12] This view of the shared culture of colonisation is also taken up by Morrison (1979), Scott (1985, 1990), and Trigger (1985, 183–225).
- [13] See also Morrison (1992a; 1992b; 2002). A well-developed critique of Eliadian thinking throughout religious studies is Dudley (1977).
- [14] The "big headed" or masked monsters of the *fariseos* group belong to a secret society whose name, I am warned, should not appear in print outside of Lent. As a respectful gesture, I will use circumlocution regarding these performers.
- [15] My understanding of the Yoeme dramatisation of this battle between good and evil reflects an approach to ethnographically reading indigenous rituals. In particular, I agree with Trexler that "missionary theatre of Mexico was ethnography" (1987, 594; his emphasis). In contrast to Trexler's focus on the clergy's role as the ethnographic authors, however, I would prefer to think diachronically about native authorship and communicative intentions, both internally and externally.
- [16] In a similar manner, Jeffrey Anderson (2001, 695–6) examines how the Northern Arapaho translation of the Christian prayer, "Our Father," negates the label of religious "conversion."
- [17] Along this line of questioning, I am intrigued by the work of other scholars working among native hunters. Tim Ingold (2004), Sylvie Poirier (2004), and Adrian Tanner (2004), are among the authors providing both the casestudies and the theoretical models that might enable a better understand of the importance of hunting to indigenous ontology and epistemology.

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### **Biographical Note**

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