Binary thinking and the study of Yoeme Indian *lutu'uria*/truth

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Ethnography, the writing of particular cultures, has become central to many of the sub-disciplines of the social sciences; particularly, ethnographic reports constitute the basis of descriptive anthropology. As the written interpretation of culture, ethnography has been and continues to be shaped by hermeneutical assumptions and criticisms. The use of the term 'supernatural' in anthropological literature evidences a way of seeing the world that often, if not always, reflects historically situated, particularly 'modernist', approaches to understanding culture, especially the cultures of non-Western peoples. To quote Morton Klass (1995:30, emphasis in original), the term 'supernatural' evidences more about anthropologists than about the culture on which they write: 'It remorselessly, inescapably categorizes all the information the ethnographer collects in terms of one consideration only—what the *ethnographer* considers to be part of reality and what the *ethnographer* personally excludes from reality'.

Taking Klass's lead, I focus on how we might choose to understand the use of 'supernatural' as a tendency of modernist ethnographers who decontextualised their anthropological subjects. Through the employment of binary models, these ethnographies portrayed cultural dominance. I first locate the use of dichotomous paradigms within a history of power and ethnological knowledge production. I then relate the use of 'supernatural' to other interpretive terms, specifically 'belief', which lack cross-cultural accuracy. Building upon the approach of Rodney Needham's (1972) and Kenneth Morrison's (1992a, b) studies of the Yoeme Indians, I argue that the term 'supernatural' always carries with it ethnocentric notions about the universe, nature, and knowledge. Only when ethnographers use the category of 'supernatural' as a means of exploring the cultural differences regarding these basic notions does the term become productive to the anthropological task.

Arthur Vidich and Stanford Lyman historicise various ethnographic moments in their 1994 essay on qualitative methods. They see ethnography's origins in the descriptive journal entries of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European explorers, who wanted to make sense of foreign others in terms of the biblical narrative, determining how others fitted into the creation story. (They are not speaking here of auto-ethnographies or what some are now understanding to

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be pre-colonial ethnographic representations.) In the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Spanish colonialists, conquistadors, and Christian missionaries wrote to their authorities about the non-Christian others. Representatives of sea-borne empires were writing about other cultures within the contexts of military and labour/slave relations. In the twentieth century, Vidich and Lyman write, American and European ethnographers were commissioned by their educational institutions to determine the level of evolutionary social 'progress' maintained by other cultures, as compared with the most progressive Western nation-states, as the 'learned' social scientists understood their respective cultures to be. These latter reports either predicted the disappearance of the other cultures or their transformation into post-tribal, capitalist societies. After the 1950s, when the number of 'undiscovered' societies became minimal, ethnographers increased their focus upon the 'aliens' within their own lands, in colonial states and on Indian reservations. Vidich and Lyman note the beginnings of postmodern concerns within ethnography around the late 1970s and early 1980s; specifically, they see Peter Manning's (1991 [1982]) essay as a beginning of 'the emancipatory movement in ethnographic methodology' (Vidich & Lyman 1994:39).

Although I severely truncate their history of ethnographic writings here, I appreciate Vidich and Lyman for showing how Manning warns against ethnographic employment of psychological, economic, and physical scientific categories of analysis, when those divisions are not maintained as such by the culture under study. He devalues analytical induction, finding weakness in its subjectivity to cultural 'fads and fashions'. The works of many ethnographers, anthropologists, scholars of religion, and literary critics reveal that modernist ethnographies tend to decontextualise their subjects of study, and interpret them in oppositional terms to the perspective of a dominant culture.

Past ethnographers were guided in their categorical selective process by modernist parameters of Western intellectual rationality, thus privileging the logic of empiricism over the epistemologies of other cultural groups. James Clifford (1986:101) has demonstrated how cultural observers tended to depict the activities and social structures of others in terms of the presuppositions of their own milieux. Clifford noted that, while mathematical models, social functionalism, and psychological models encouraged ethnographers to interpret other cultures in terms significant within the ethnographers' own academic and cultural systems, these models simply fail to provide adequate cross-cultural interpretations of 'others'.

Needham's work with the Penan supported Clifford's critique of the modernist ethnographic practice of decontextualisation. In his 1972 study, Needham discovered that the Penan have no way of saying 'I believe'. He then compared his findings with those of E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who found the same situation among the Nuer. Needham thus found cross-cultural support for his thesis

that previous hermeneutic strategies misinterpreted non-literate cultures. He subsequently mapped a Western-European philosophy that contrasted premodern belief with scientific knowledge. This philosophy, he claimed, justified an intellectual rejection of many non-Western religious realities. Needham (1972: 171) demonstrates the ethnocentric character of the ethnographic employment of 'belief':

> [Belief and experience] are convenient, and well enough defined, for the description and analysis of our own mental life, but they have recorded, as it were, results gradually acquired by our psychology and our theory of knowledge, and thus bear the mark of our civilization.

Needham's and Clifford's designations of decontextualisation as an ethnographically modernist practice make sense in terms of Robert Neville's (1992:57) definition of global modernism as:

> the cultural style that attempts to integrate things so that they have self-contained intelligibility and worth. It is anti-historical, then, because historical reference moves beyond the artifact. It is obsessed with being grounded, certain, self-justifying. This is possible when things are abstracted from their ongoing context of life and treated in themselves.

The modernist desire for order and explanation led to the abstraction of knowledge into manageable, albeit exclusionary, terms of comparison. As Jonathan Smith (1982:1–18) pointed out, the use of taxonomic strategies remained a hallmark of modernist academic practices. I agree with Smith, but would delineate as problematic not taxonomy per se, but, specifically, ways of ordering the universe that are not cross-culturally valid (see Aragon this issue).

Bruce Lawrence (1989) notes how the management of complex data through abstraction leads to oppositional or binary thinking. In modernist systems of thought, according to Lawrence, the oppositional categories of thought/action, tradition/modernity, mind/body, continuity/change, nature/culture, primitive/civilised and natural/supernatural replace the nuanced realities of non-dualistic and non-hierarchically divided cosmologies. The task of knowing then becomes, through the imposition of such categories, 'to conjoin two disparate, often irreconcilable categories, weigh them, rank them, and finally choose between them or somehow reconcile them' (Lawrence 1989:29). Lawrence provides an understanding of binary thinking that will be central in my discussion, since many notions of 'supernatural' rely upon Christian concepts of divinity, grace and worship, all of which imply a power difference and value orientation that is 'other'-oriented. As Dorothy Lee (1971:417), Sam Gill (1982:38–51) and I (Shorter 2002:231–233) explain elsewhere, other-oriented value orientations may adequately explain Christian notions of the 'sacred', but they often contradict indigenous representations of kinship and relations with other-than-human

beings. I agree with Lawrence that oppositional categories reorder diversity into artificial semblances of simplicity, and create a false sense of assurance that the modernist paradigm yields universal truths. Supernatural vs. natural is only one artificial binary.

Even a cursory review of ethnographies of non-Western cultures shows a handful of essays devoted to the explication of how certain terms fail to address indigenous or tribal realities. Irving Hallowell (1960) demonstrates the fundamental differences between Western and Ojibwa concepts of 'person' and 'human'. Noted above, Needham (1972) takes 'religion' and 'belief' to task. Talal Asad (1993) also examines the dangers of 'belief' terminology when speaking of the religions of others. Barbara Meyerhoff (1974) shows the misapplication of 'god', 'prayer', and 'veneration' in Huichol ethnographies. Richard Nelson (1983) asks his readers to consider a non-Western notion of 'natural' in his description of the Koyukon. Such lists might easily lead one to conclude, as Morrison (1992a: 204) has written, that 'western religious concepts lead only to limited, even parochial, insights'. In these cases, are we left to echo Needham's call for the complete abandonment of such terms? Needham (1972:189) questions whether, even in the hypothetical sense, one should use 'belief' as a descriptive term, and he answers himself elaborately:

> The observer would first have to stipulate the particular definition of belief that he chose to adopt, then make explicit the grounds of comparison between that culture and his own, and only thereafter isolate the points of similarity between the alien situation and the English paradigm of belief that he had especially in mind. By this stage, however, he would have accomplished his description, by means of the categories and standards of intelligibility proper to the culture in question, only without deriving any objective benefit from the English word 'belief'.

While I believe Needham's argument here has distinct merits, I personally lean toward an exploration of the tension that such cross-cultural conundrums might provide. The call for dialectic and inter-subjective analysis (a discourse on the discourse) provides at least one solution to the all-or-nothing approach that Needham seems to be suggesting. The discerning of why and how terms like 'supernatural' fail to portray the life-worlds of others appropriately is both challenging and possibly highly rewarding (see Raverty this issue). Using 'supernatural' as my point of departure here, we can see how Morrison utilises the inadequacy of such a term to discern an indigenous theory of ritual as shared by members of the tribe I work with, the Yoemem of north-west Mexico. Although they are commonly referred to as 'Yaquis', I use their own term for themselves, 'Yoemem'.

Morrison (1992b) takes the issue of hermeneutical translation seriously in his article, 'Sharing the flower: A non-supernaturalistic theory of grace'. He begins

by reviewing Åke Hultkrantz's 1983 essay, 'The concept of the supernatural in primal religions', and demonstrates that Hultkrantz's definition of religion relies on a concept of the supernatural. More importantly, he shows that, for Hultkrantz, the supernatural has 'one outstanding characteristic: it enjoys a vertical superiority over everyday reality' (Morrison 1992b:207). He notes, appropriately, that:

> Wittingly, or not, Hultkrantz thus aligns himself with the Christian worldview in which not only does grace come from on high, but also the cosmos is hierarchically constituted in a great chain of being from God's perfection to a natural world tainted by human sin. (p. 207)

Morrison then shows how this privileged notion of the supernatural taints the ethnographic representation of the Yoeme by Edward Spicer (1940, 1954, 1980).

For Spicer, Yoeme ritual juxtaposes the pre-Christian worldview of Deer Dancing with the Easter Passion Play, in a way that enables community members to understand their deer-hunting ceremonies as a metaphor for the search for and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. As Morrison (1992b:209–211) shows, Spicer then dichotomises Yoeme ritual into two opposing components: first, the 'sacred' Catholic 'supernaturals', such as Jesus, Mary and the saints; and, second, the Deer Dance and the 'profane' dancing of masked *pahko'olam* ('ceremonial hosts, entertainers, and ritual performers'). Although Spicer thought the apparently pre-Christian *pahko'ola* and deer dancing would eventually be historically displaced, he noted that Yoemem still perform the dances in order to receive 'grace' from the Catholic 'supernaturals'. In this way, Spicer relies on his understanding of Catholicism as he knew it in Muncie, Indiana, without questioning the hermeneutical implications of his concepts of 'grace' and 'supernatural'. Yet, Spicer's attention to the word 'grace' provided the clue to understanding how Yoeme people locate Catholic personae within an indigenous worldview, since the Yoeme have translated 'grace' as '*sewa*', or 'flower'.

Based upon my own fieldwork among Yoeme villages within the last 10 years (most often in Potam pueblo in Sonora, Mexico), I agree with Morrison that, while the term 'flower' signifies a material blooming flower, many Yoemem conceive of the flower as an empowering presence, an image perhaps that, while apparently objective, embodies personal or collective sacrifice that makes ritual efficacious. I offer the following ethnographic description.

Yoemem explain their conceptions of Jesus through their stories about him 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. She placed it between her breasts in order to walk home and share the flower's beauty with Joseph. In stories of Jesus as a

man, Yoemem often describe him as walking in the *huya ania*, a realm of the world out in the *monte* ('mountains'), healing people among the flowers. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, often conceived as Mary transformed into a tree, the blood that flowed from his wounds hit the ground and became flowers. For all of these reasons, Yoeme sometimes refer to Jesus as 'flower person', and clearly relate to him and Mary in terms they themselves recognise as ethical behaviour and sacrificial reciprocity.

Jesus's giving of himself for others is further evident in the Easter ceremonies, in which the Yoeme portray Jesus for 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, during the 'Running of the Old Man', the latter is chased around the pueblos and surrounding wilderness by *fariseos* ('soldiers and masked men acting as the Pharisees') who seek his death. In large processions increasing and intensifying throughout Lent from weekly to daily, and then in the last few days occurring both day and night, Yoemem carry statues of the saints and the Marys (many Yoeme processions include three different figures of the Virgin Mary), as the *fariseos* follow in pursuit of Jesus. They 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 and tease him. Then they tie him to a post and whip him. The *fariseos* bring out a large, life-size cross with an attached crucified Christ statue covered in a white sheet. When they finish pantomiming the nailing of Jesus, they lift the large cross still covered in white, and flowers fall down upon the ground beneath it. The *fariseos*, clearly happy, move Jesus inside the church and lay his corpse 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* use a series of processional formations and building, 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 that has dissected 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. Members of the ceremonial society of Mary, the *matachinis*, play their music and dance flowers for her, holding flower wands and wearing flower hats. First in the church, and then moving outside the front doors, the *pahko'olam* dance around the flower patio. Simultaneously, the deer dancer is bringing his cosmic dimension, the *sea ania*, into presence. The *sea ania*, or flower world, is another realm of the Yoeme cosmos where the deer live, often conceived as under the dawn and wherever the *huya ania* ('wilderness world') opens up into the blossoms of complete being. Thus, through this ritual sacrifice, the various Yoeme dimensions coexist—the pueblo,

the church, the *huya ania*, the *sea ania*—and, since the latter two are pre-Christian derivatives, they also signify the enchanted world of Yoeme ancestry, the *yo ania*. Here, at the place where these worlds come together, the onlookers throw confetti flowers at the attacking *fariseos*. For what seems like hours, the community is showered by multicoloured flowers drifting on the wind and upon a sea of swirling being. After the whole community defeats evil, fireworks shoot into the sky heralding Saint Michael's return to heaven having collected everyone's sacrifice in the form of the flower. All who have come and given of themselves during the previous season (performers, family members, observers) are considered to be sharing in this flower, this grace that originates not from God on high but through collective sacrifice.

In his analysis of flower symbolism in Yoeme culture, Morrison demonstrates how their understanding of 'flower' as reciprocating sacrifice provides Yoemem with an indigenous theory of ritual power, by which they make sense of Catholic cosmology and Christian ceremonial performances. He shows the pervasiveness of flower symbolism not only throughout Yoeme conceptions of the deer and *pahko'ola* but also throughout their ideas about cosmic beings and ceremonial labour. Morrison brings together many flower stories to explain how Yoemem make sense of Jesus, Mary, various saints and Christian dimensionality *within pre-existing* models of ritual sacrifice and shared responsibility among all cosmic beings. His analysis suggests that Yoemem are not performing these rituals to appease 'supernatural' powers, as Spicer's use of the term implies. As Morrison demonstrates, flowers for the Yoemem are the material proof that all life is related by acts of sacrifice. Rather than a grace that comes from above, as 'supernatural' implies, flowers ground Yoeme ethical actions in social, earthly, and mutual kinship relations.

Since most of the previous ethnographers of Yoeme culture dichotomised Yoeme ritual according to foreign notions about sacred/profane, supernatural, worship, or belief, Morrison's examination of the flower brings us much closer to understanding Yoeme-Catholic identity. In particular, his analysis of the flower as a non-supernaturalistic theory of grace exemplifies the way Yoeme ritual, regardless of its Catholic characteristics, proceeds from an indigenous commitment to other-than-human kinship. Morrison's analysis results from his desire to unpack the complicated issues of understanding 'grace' and 'supernatural' cross-culturally, here in the contexts of Spicer's concept of Catholicism and Yoeme Catholicism. Rather than simply avoiding the term 'supernatural' in his cultural descriptions, Morrison focuses on the interpretive problems posed by this category, in order to develop a more Yoeme-centred perspective on ritual and religious syncretism. His work supports Benson Saler's (1993:124) claim that: 'Supernatural, in sum, is not a meaningful category for many non-Westerners. And it is a meaningful but fuzzy and often judgmental one for numbers of Westerners'.

'Supernatural', then, must be considered among the many complicated categories often misapplied by anthropologists of religion to discern the life-worlds of others. I quickly learned in my work in Yoeme villages that Yoeme have no word for 'religion'. When asked, they tell me that the word '*kohtumbre*' (a Spanish loan word for 'custom', but used also for 'society') most closely approximates the idea of religion. No direct translation exists for 'nature' or 'natural'. To unpack such a concept ethnographically would require a lengthy description of all seven or eight '*aniam*' (possible states of being), which roughly relate to geographical/cosmological spaces. When I want to talk with Yoeme community members in Potam pueblo about the larger collection of what anthropologists might call supernatural happenings, events or beings, I must use the word '*lutu'uria*', which translates as 'truth'. To be even more exact, I could ask about '*yo'ora lutu'uria*', thereby referring to 'elders' truth'.

Accordingly, references to the *aniam*, as well as experiential knowledge of cultural traditions and religious practices, are expressed in performances that socially assert and test truth claims. These dances and speeches are religious obligations and ways of representing core aspects of Yoeme identity. Thus, *lutu'uria* provides a means by which Yoemem share their sense of the 'real' world. As Klass might explain, *lutu'uria* helps them order their universe. That the Yoeme categorical term for what counts as religion is itself an epistemological statement about veracity opens another can of worms about what is knowable, provable, or, in religious studies terms, the 'really real'. I have attempted to show that, rather than approaching this hermeneutical challenge as a can of worms, we might see the work of discerning the accuracy of our ethnological categories as a path of inquiry leading to further cross-cultural understandings of religiosity. Embarking on that path, we have more to gain than from either simply using or avoiding the term 'supernatural'.

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