

Yoeme (Yaqui) Ritual

The Río Yaqui is the northernmost of five Mexican rivers that drain the mountains of what was once called New Spain and which is now called the state of Sonora. Sitting within this land, alongside the Yaqui River, are the Yoeme Pueblos, often referred to as the original Eight Pueblos. (The term “original” marks a distinction between these communities in Sonora and those created much later on the other side of the U.S.–Mexico border.) Within these villages live the Yoeme Indians, often called the Yaquis. Based on the direct translation “Yoemem” = “People,” and joining a recent cross-tribal move to reference tribes by names in their respective languages, I retain the use of “Yaqui/s” in the contexts of proper place-names, previously published quotes, and titles, while using “Yoeme/m” within the following descriptions.

Yoeme oral tradition places their homeland in northwest Mexico long before European contact and sometime earlier than human existence as we know it today. Any research into aboriginal Yoeme lifeways will undoubtedly lead to the world of the Surem, small proto-Yoemem who lived in complete unity with their environment. These ancestors of the Yoemem are said to have communicated telepathically with all living beings and were the original inhabitants of the *hiakim*, or Yoeme homeland. Oral histories of this primary era recount the presence of a tree that was making an unintelligible humming sound. After much confusion, a young woman was able to translate the tree’s prophecies that a group of people were coming over the ocean from the west and that some of them would try to take the land, and others would bring new technologies, baptism, and subsequently a whole new way of living. The prophecy leads to some of the Surem leaving to the hills and the ocean, to remain enchanted beings. The other half of the Surem decided to stay in the *hiakim*, Yoeme “homeland,” preparing to fight the Conquistadors and welcome the Jesuits. According to some Yoeme historians, the Konkista (the real “conquest”) took place as the people responded in factions to the prophecy, before the Europeans ever arrived.

Having defeated Spanish armies three times between 1533 and 1609, Yoemem were able to invite two Jesuit missionaries to their pueblos in 1617, while simultaneously keeping the Spanish conquistadors at bay. Military strength provided Yoemem control over their own combining of pre-contact traditions and Catholicism. We are immediately faced, therefore, with a different colonial situation than that confronted by most Native Americans and many indigenous peoples elsewhere. Yoemem powerfully enforced and strategically maintained their territorial and cultural boundaries, allowing for self-management from pre-Columbian time up through Jesuit collaboration. Thus, the Yoeme clearly cannot be quickly included within popular scholarly imaginings of “The” indigenous colonial

experience. Primarily, in contrast to forced “conversions,” we know from both Yoeme and Spanish sources that the Yoeme invited the Jesuits into their territory. Both Jesuit documents and Yoeme oral traditions record that the Yoemem were eager to learn new approaches to civil planning, including farming and ranching. According to the primary Yoeme myth, The Singing Tree, the people had already received prophetic knowledge that such changes were coming.

The Singing Tree, many Yoemem claim, also prophesied that outsiders to the tribe would seek to push Yoemem off their homeland. The relationship between history and myth is nowhere more important than in these issues of boundary maintenance. In the early nineteenth century, approximately fifty years after Spain expelled the Jesuits, the emerging Mexican administrators began instituting an *encomienda* system of land tenure which slowly and steadily led to the more familiar colonial relations we see across the globe between indigenous peoples and colonizers. Throughout most of the next century, Yoeme people were deported, massacred, and driven off their homelands. Perhaps the crux of this disregard for Yoeme sovereignty came in the early twentieth century, when Angostura Dam was being built to direct water to larger Mexican cities and away from the original Eight Pueblos. The remaining half of the twentieth century framed Yoemem rebuilding villages, reinvigorating religious societies, and developing ways to regain control of their Aboriginal homeland. The control of land and the continuation of indigenous identity are co-dependent for most Yoemem.

One movement toward environmental sovereignty includes working with Mexican banking institutions to develop credit relations using the land as collateral. However, a widespread concern among the Yoeme is that the land has become a means of exchange with the banks. In order to support themselves and accumulate collective wealth for such things as education programs and ceremonial performances, Yoemem in the Río Yaqui are repeatedly forced to borrow money to work their own land, the profits of which are distributed so thinly that they are in constant debt. Essentially, they are working their own land, but only earning enough for the most basic level of sustenance, always in fear of losing that land to the banks. Another option some community members want to explore includes selling land outright to the banks or non-Yoeme individuals, thereby avoiding the long process of slow debt accumulation and possible loss of land. Either of these two maneuvers put the tribe in a disadvantageous position: living in debt, or selling their tribal inheritance. So although Mexican President Lazaro Cárdenas in 1937 decreed a *Zona Yaqui*, members of the Eight Pueblos still struggle for complete control over their *hiakim*. Understandably, the struggle is fueled by a collective sense of belonging to a native community and is secured by a landscape and religious tradition that

reaches beyond the times of Spaniards and Jesuit missionaries.

Still, most of the ethnographers of Yoeme culture have struggled to make sense of Yoeme religious identity since the cultural performances suggest that they converted; and most Yoemem themselves claim to be Catholics. For example, almost every village performs a season-length passion play of the life of Jesus (a man who walked through the *hiakim*) while simultaneously bringing to life masked beings, deer dancers, and their related dimensions. But scholars have previously been looking for pre-conceived categories of sacred or profane, Christian or pagan, ritual or art, pre- or post-contact; all of which fail to characterize Yoeme notions of religious action. Thus, some of the most well-versed ethnographers of Yoeme culture understood the deer dance as a folk art left over from a pre-Christian culture (Painter 1986: 271; Spicer 1984: 289–99). How do we make sense of rituals that clearly signify a previous mode of sustenance when those relationships with “nature” are no longer available or feasible? As of recently, very few Yoemem continue to hunt deer in the Eight Pueblos. Yet, few scholars have been attentive to the ways that Yoeme rituals utilize Christian symbols or characters within an indigenous logic, a conceptual framework that is inseparable from the geography, landscape and dimensionality that many might call “nature.”

Many Yoemem understand their world as dimensionally composed of overlapping, yet distinct worlds or realms, called “*aniam*.” The literature suggests as many as nine different *aniam*: *tenku ania*: a dream world, *tuka ania*: night world, *huya ania*: wilderness world, *yo ania*: enchanted world, *nao ania*: corn cob world, heaven, hell, purgatory, and *sea ania*: flower world. Each of these worlds provides a home for powerful beings or forces, and Yoeme relate deer dancing with three specifically, since the deer emerges from an enchanted home, *yo ania*, into the wilderness world, *huya ania*, and dances for us in the flower world, *sea ania*. Understanding the importance of the *sea ania* in Yoeme religion is fundamental, since flowers, *seewam*, are the actualization of sacrifice and the nurturing acts of giving. The most nurturing aspects of nature are found in *the sea ania*: streams, lakes, clouds, rain. The deer lives in the *sea ania* and when he is killed, he is laid atop a bed of flowers. 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 scholar and Deer Singer, the main purpose of the songs is to bring 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* (fiestero). Wearing black masks in either the shape of a humanoid face or of a goat’s head, *pahko’olam* lead the deer dancer into the performance area where he will spend the evening dancing with him, the two clowning around with each other, and entertaining the guests. When not dancing with the deer, *pahko’olam* wear their masks backwards or hang them from the left side of the head, since the devil is said to come from the left. Common mask designs include the elongated goat-face style with ears and horns. Small insects or desert animals are often painted on the masks. Typical Yoeme *pahko’ola* masks feature a band of small triangles pointing inward around the outside circumference, considered to be goat’s teeth, sun rays, or mountains. Additionally, many masks have cross-like paintings which some relate to Christianity, although I have also heard in various conversations that this was a pre-contact, sand-painting symbol for the sun. Both the elongated and face-shaped masks have horse hair dangling over the eyes and from the chin. There is a strong connection in the ethnographic literature between *pahko’olam*, goats and the *yo ania*. Their pre-colonial beginnings are referenced by their often used title, “old men of the fiesta.” Since they also are sometimes called “sons of the devil,” we should again be conscious of the tendency to relate the *yo ania* to concepts of evil and the devil. When attending an all-night *pahko*, the banter and antics of the *pahko’olam* help elevate the moods and energy of the crowd. The dancers are charged with passing out cigarettes to the audience members and more often than not create quite a stir by attempting to humiliate the deer dancer, musicians, the female societies to their right, and even the spectators.

Undoubtedly, the most well-known and most often described Yoeme rituals are those within the ceremonial season associated with Lent. From January 3rd to May 5th, the pueblos are governed by the religious society authorities. During these months, the atmosphere changes as both indigenous and Christian dimensions come together in a fantastic spectacle on Easter Saturday. On the morning of Holy Saturday, the *Fariseos* (pharisees, religious soldier group) and masked beings use a series of processional formations and building and staccato rhythms to rush the church repeatedly. As protectors of the church and the saints inside, *anhelitom* (“our 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 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. 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 mov-

ing 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 these 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 soldiers (*Fariseos*). For what seems like hours, the community is showered by multicolored 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 since he has collected everyone's sacrifice in the form of the flower. Everyone who has 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.

As other contributors have noted in this volume, the word "nature" has no direct translation in Yoeme; nor can we directly translate "religion." I quickly learned in my work in Yoeme villages that to talk about religion, I would use the word "*kohtumbre*" (a Spanish loan word for "custom" but used also for "society"), which most closely approximates the idea of religion. To ethnographically unpack the concept of "nature" entails the discussion of all seven or eight *aniam*, or possible states of being, which roughly relate to geographical/cosmological spaces. Perhaps the best term to draw all this material together is *lutu'uria*, which translates as "truth" but entails a socially performative component, a sharing of ritual knowledge. Thus, 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 Yoeme share their sense of the "real" world, namely, "nature."

David Shorter

Further Reading

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- See also: Castaneda, Carlos; Radical Environmentalism (and adjacent, Rodney Coronado and the Animal Liberation Front).

Yoga and Ecology

The Yoga tradition originated several thousand years ago in India. Early evidence of Yoga practice can be found in Indus Valley seals unearthed in Mohenjodaro and other cities that date from 3500 B.C.E. Textual references to Yoga appear in the middle Upanisads and the Mahabharata, dating from about 600 B.C.E. The Buddha and the Jina (ca. 500 B.C.E.) both taught yogic styles of meditation. By around 200, Patanjali summarized Yoga practices in a classic text known as the *Yoga Sutra*. Sanskrit texts such as the *Yogavasishta* (ca. 1000) and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (ca. 1500) describe various forms of Vedantic and esoteric Yoga. Haribhadra's *Yogadrstisamuccya* (ca. 750) and Hemaandra's *Yogasastra* (ca. 1250) discuss the adaptation of the tradition to the Jaina faith, while the later texts of Kabir and Guru Nanak allude to Yoga meditation from universalist and Sikh perspectives. Yoga continues to be practiced throughout India and has become increasingly popular worldwide.

In its various manifestations, Yoga includes practices and philosophical positions that accord with values espoused by modern ecologists. Unlike many other schools of thought in India, Yoga is thoroughly realistic. It builds upon the Samkhya school of philosophy, first espoused by a near-mythical sage named Kapila who perhaps lived in northeastern India around 900 B.C.E. Kapila's teachings were later systematized by a philosopher known as Isvarakrishna, who composed the *Samkhya Karika* in the early centuries of the Common Era. In this seminal text, the author exerts great care to articulate the existence and importance of the natural world. He posits that the world