

Rituals of Others, and Other Others

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Anne Mocko's fine essay carries two titles: "On Tree Marriage" and "Encountering the Rituals of Others." As is often the case, the main title gives us her topic, while the subtitle gives us a sense of what she wishes to demonstrate from her study of this topic, namely, that contemporary scholars of ritual should not treat the objects of their scholarship as "others," as "people who are ontologically different from oneself" (3). Thus, whereas according to her analysis James Frazer viewed tree marriage as an artifact of primitive minds, unable to distinguish between the human and non-human world, Mocko assures us that the people who marry trees or otherwise incorporate non-human subjects into their ritual performance are at a minimum perfectly rational, usually quite sympathetic and sometimes downright admirable. They engage the non-human world through ritual in order to solve social problems, or to generate certain kinds of social problems, or even simply as a form of entertainment. A wedding party is a wedding party, even if it happens to celebrate the marriage of two frogs!

I, for one, am inclined to grant Mocko's point on this score, and my thinking about ritual is considerably richer for the examples she provides. Nevertheless, while reading, I was struck by the—possibly unintentional, possibly deliberate—dual valence of the "other" in the essay. The human actors in all of these rituals appear to represent the intended referent: those non-

European or non-20<sup>th</sup> century persons who were, for Frazer, “simply *other*,” primitive and irrational (2). Mocko sets out, quite properly, to trouble this assumption. Yet, the essay itself spends at least as much time detailing the ritual activity of another set of “others” altogether: trees, *tulsi* plants, stones, *bel* fruit, images of gods, frogs, and at least one dog. Mocko does not directly trouble the classification of *these* non-human subjects as “other,” though she draws our attention approvingly to several places where rituals function to do just that – most notably, the two examples of tree-ordination in Thailand.

The double-valence of “other” in Mocko's essay suggests a rough analogy or parallel between these ritual activities and the theorizing of them by the likes of Frazer, Mocko and many others in the academy. Both kinds of activity draw their respective others into a sphere of action that, so far as we can tell, these others did not choose. But, and this is important for Mocko's argument, this can be done in different ways and for different strategic purposes. In a number of the rituals she describes, the “other” serves no purpose other than to deflect and absorb some consequence that might otherwise redound to a human being. This is the case for the Bengali and Vellala men who take trees as their inauspicious second, third or fourth wives, as well as the American husband who marries the statue of a god. In the marriages of Nepali girls to the god in the form of *bel* fruit or of the two frogs in drought-stricken Pawati, the non-human others possess a more ambivalent status. Their role in the ritual is unambiguously positive, but they possess no value, in and of themselves—Mocko notes that the *bel* fruit is “respectfully discarded at the end of the ritual” (13).

On Mocko's reading, Frazer takes a fundamentally similar attitude towards the human “others” whose rituals he describes in *The Golden Bough*. At best, such others have value

primarily due to the role they play in the construction of theory; at worst, as has now been amply documented in the annals of postcolonialist theory, they function to deflect and absorb reified negative associations with irrationality, magic or superstition. The other is represented—or, better, misrepresented—primarily or solely for the purpose of the self.

To the degree that this parallel rings true, it seems natural to search for some analogue to Mocko herself as a scholar and theorist. And this we find, I think, in those rituals that function to draw their non-human others into new moral or affective relationships with the primary, human ritual actors, such as the Javanese ritual of marrying a palm tree before harvesting it, the tree ordinations and the dog marriage in India. This last example is particularly telling, because it illustrates not one but two contrasting attitudes toward the other. One, characteristic of the man's earlier behavior, renders the dog as an object that can be treated with cruelty; the other, re-ordered through ritual, welcomes the dog as a bride, as not-other, as worthy of sympathy and high regard. As a student of “the rituals of others,” Mocko argues for the latter approach.

Perhaps because I read this essay shortly after listening to a radio documentary on the psychology and social lives of dogs,<sup>1</sup> however, I was struck by one element that seemed to be missing in the dog marriage ritual, at least in the brief recounting Mocko provides: that is, any evident regard for the dog *as other, as a dog*. The dog and the trees acquire new moral value precisely through their strategic, imaginative misrepresentation as something *other* than the *others* that they actually are. Mocko argues convincingly that the human actors do not evidence any confusion in this regard: they do not mistake the dog for an actual bride, or the tree for a monk. And this more generous misrepresentation serves an important purpose in restoring the

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1 “Ideas: Dogs Themselves,” *CBC Radio*, <<http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/2010/12/13/dogs-themselves-part-1--3/>>, accessed 20 April 2011.

balance, particularly in light of those strategies of misrepresentation that render the other “simply *other*,” outside the circle of moral regard. But misrepresentation it nevertheless remains.

For this reason, despite my appreciation for Mocko's generous approach in this essay, I confess a slight preference for a third analogue among the rituals she details: the two accounts of *tulsi* marriages, to a stone in one case and an image of Krishna in the other. Here, the other remains other, and the representations are treated as representations—albeit representations through which the human actors aspire to encounter these others directly. Such aspiration for authentic encounter represents a powerful, important motivator for ritual and scholarship alike; yet, we invariably work out this aspiration through our own (mis)representations of others. Like the Nepali and other ritual actors Mocko so richly documents, scholars invariably make strategic, imaginative misrepresentations to solve our theoretic problems, or indeed to generate new ones. And we, like they, should remain vigilant not to confuse our representations with the reality.