

On tree marriage And encountering the rituals of others

When I took the course “Classical Theories of Religion” in my first year of graduate school, we were assigned for our final paper to “select a sentence from some text we had read, and unpack it.” I selected a sentence (or rather, two sentences) from James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*:

The custom of physically marrying men and women to trees is still practiced in India and other parts of the East. Why should it not have obtained in ancient Latium?¹

This sentence had the beauty of containing both the strikingly exotic claim that primitive people marry trees, and also the breathtaking logical leap that the contemporary practices of ‘India and other parts of the East’ could and should be read back into the practices of ancient Europe (specifically, to ancient Rome and the worship of Diana at Nemi, which forms the interpretive frame to the entire work). In my paper, I skewered *The Golden Bough* with joy—and no little sense of superiority—and in some fifteen pages dismantled the overall logic (or perhaps, illogic) of Frazer’s masterwork.

But as time went on, and as I spent increasing amounts of time in Nepal in preparation for my dissertation research, I came to know that in India and Nepal, men and women *do* physically marry themselves to trees—or to plants, fruits, statues, and animals. People in South Asia also hold weddings between entirely non-human participants, such as between two animals or two plants. In fact, there are a large variety of wedding rituals staged routinely in the Indian subcontinent in which at least one of the marital partners is not a person. Moreover, even in my

¹ James George Frazer. *The Golden Bough*. The reference is found on p. 40–41 of the 1911 Macmillan and Co edition, which is used here throughout because it contains Frazer’s original footnotes (unlike the newer and [marginally] more reader-friendly single-volume editions).

original project, I had no reason to doubt the accuracy of Frazer's data: although Frazer reports his data in condescending and often stultifying prose, and provides none of the cultural or historical contexts that might make his examples meaningful, his ethnographic information seems basically correct.² So the more I thought about it, the more it seemed that James Frazer had in fact put his finger on something rather strange and quite interesting. People in India and other parts of the East do, with some regularity, conduct weddings involving trees, plants, and other assorted non-humans. This observation then stands to pose a substantial interpretive problem: what might one actually say about someone who married a tree?

For Frazer, the phenomenon of tree marriage would not have been particularly troubling from a methodological standpoint. In his view, people who were separated in either time or space from 20th century Western Europe were simply *other*: he presumed that pre-modern and non-western people were unable to think rationally or scientifically, and so they encountered the world through a combination of superstition, magic, and irrational ritual. This meant that there was no particular need to explain the oddness of a practice beyond the fact that it was primitive. In his *Golden Bough*, tree marriage was simply one among hundreds of examples of the almost boundless absurdity of primitive minds; although Frazer makes few arguments specifically about tree marriage, it would seem that the practice merely served as further evidence that non-Europeans were not even capable of comprehending the proper demarcations between human and non-human.

² I judge this in part by the fact that his first example in the present context is a widespread practice attested elsewhere in scholarly literature, and in part because in my previous work I followed Frazer's footnotes to his source-texts; while the source texts are all the products of the colonial production of knowledge about subject peoples, Frazer's sources do generally give detailed first-hand descriptions together with specific local ethnographic context.

Thus, while I strongly object to the interpretive projects of Frazer and many of his sources, I believe they can be trusted to report practices that actually did happen.

In the present historical and academic context, however, such an analysis is simply untenable. A scholar cannot assert that a practice is peculiar because it is performed by people who are irreconcilably and ontologically different from oneself. One could, of course, make allowances for variability in cultural attitudes to nature, or for differences in thought-patterns between literate and non-literate peoples. But it is not now possible to encounter a practice such as tree-marriage and presume that the people involved in or observing the event cannot tell the difference between people and plants, or assume that (barring mental illness) a person who married a tree must have considered the tree an appropriate alternative to marrying a person.³ One must assume instead that across cultures and times, weddings are rituals that establish a kinship bond between two humans, and that inserting a non-human into any role in that ritual would consistently strike the participants and observers as incongruous. Thus, in a post-Frazer world, the question must not be ‘How could primitives be so silly as to marry trees?’, but rather ‘What is happening socially when people perform human rituals for non-humans?’ This, I believe, is an infinitely more complicated question, and has everything to do with what kind of motivation, agency, and ultimately humanity we grant when we study the rituals of others.

I.

Before explaining my own examples of analogous rituals, I would like to lay out first the examples of tree marriage in Frazer’s original text. Frazer brings up tree marriage in his introduction, in the context of his lurid narration of the King of the Wood at Nemi, with the purpose of suggesting that the King of the Wood—like people in India and other parts of the

³ For a masterful critique of patterns of theorizing primitives (particularly on the classic claim that primitives are unable to distinguish between human and non-human), see Jonathan Smith’s essay “I am a Parrot (Red).”

East—physically married the tree with the golden bough on it as an act of religious devotion to the goddess Diana. This claim is footnoted, through which Frazer directs the reader to consult four other points in *The Golden Bough* itself. Three of these references within the work do provide examples of tree marriage⁴—but none of them eventually supports the initial assertion of the *Bough's* introduction. This, of course, is the story of *The Golden Bough* writ small: Frazer meticulously gathered fascinating tidbits from all over the world, then strung them together in unreadable ways to produce untenable arguments. Here, I would like to explore what happens if one returns to the starting tidbits, and pays concerted attention to each one.

As I have just mentioned, the three examples of tree marriage Frazer provides are scattered across *The Golden Bough*, unified only in their joint use as evidence for Frazer's fanciful projection of the King of the Wood. The idea that these examples might in fact prove what Frazer claims they prove falls apart as soon as one follows the very first reference. The first example supposedly supporting humans physically marrying themselves to trees turns out to be nothing of the kind: on page 26 of Frazer's second volume (in the section on "The Worship of Trees"), he instead discusses the widespread Indian custom of staging weddings for *tulsi* basil plants. Frazer explains that the *tulsi* plant "as the embodiment of a goddess, is annually married to the god Krishna in every Hindoo family."⁵ According to Frazer, the marriage is performed every year in the month of *Kartika* by having one man carry the basil plant as the 'bride' and another man carry a *shaligram*⁶ as the 'groom', and then enacting a wedding around a sacrificial fire presided over by a brahmin priest. Frazer then wanders off to describe at some length the

⁴ The fourth reference (on p. 316 of the 1911 edition, vol. 2), is actually discussing a different type of ritual in Africa, with the tag that a different commentator found the practice analogous to tree marriage in India. Since this reference is not especially illuminating, I will not give it further discussion.

⁵ Frazer (1911) vol 2: 26.

⁶ A black stone in which a fossilized spiral shell is visible.

absurd sumptuousness with which this ritual was performed by the “Rajah of Orchha at Ludhaura,” and he concludes the discussion with an explanation of German peasant uses of trees in Christmas Eve celebrations.⁷

Leaving aside the characteristic ending digression, there are several notable points to be made about the main tree-marriage reference. First, staging weddings for *tulsi* plants was in fact a common devotional activity in India during Frazer’s time, and it continues to be practiced today. (There is, for example, a book-length ethnography of *tulsi* weddings in the month of *Kartik*, in the context of Hindu women’s worship of Krishna.⁸) This suggests that, in spite of the incoherent rhetorical purposes towards which the example was introduced, the example itself is factually sound. Frazer probably overstates the pervasiveness of the practice as belonging to ‘every Hindoo family’, but the practice did exist, does exist, and has been culturally important.

Second, it is important to note that what Frazer has identified is not an example of a human physically marrying him- or herself to a tree. It is instead an example of people staging a wedding for two non-human participants: one a plant, and one a stone. However, it *is* an example of the use of weddings as devotional activities towards gods, and to that extent it does support Frazer’s original supposition. However, it would appear that the point of the basil marriage is not to establish a relationship between one person and a god in plant form, but rather to mobilize human ritual idioms in order to celebrate the relationship between two deities (whether Vishnu/Laxmi, Rama/Sita, or Krishna/Rukmini—all proposed by Frazer as identities for the two gods).

Thus, this *tulsi* wedding is an activity of devotees acting out divine relationships, and not people engaging in marriages. This perhaps is highlighted above all else by the fact that the human participants are both men: here, the involvement of a man as a ‘bride’ is not an example

⁷ Frazer (1911) vol 2: 27–8.

⁸ Namely Tracy Pintchman’s (2005) *Guests at God’s Wedding*.

of gender bending or progressive attitudes to same-sex marriage, but rather an expression of devotion to god. The two men in the ritual, as Frazer describes it, participate more or less as puppeteers for the inanimate basil bride and fossil groom, carrying the gods through the ritual in order that *the gods* may get married.

The participation of two male devotees shadowing the romantic relationship of the gods does, in fact, also have a logical basis in the theological thinking of the Vishnu-centric traditions of India. These traditions (usually centered on Krishna) have long considered devotional love for a god (*bhakti*) to be analogous to romantic attachment, allowing a man to relate to god as a woman to her lover (particularly as Radha to Krishna).⁹ The man standing in the ritual role of the ‘bride’ during the *tulsi* wedding might not *be* the bride, but in his devotion to Krishna he may well have been familiar with the analogy that he should approach the god *as if* a bride.

In this example of the *tulsi* wedding, it becomes clear that Frazer has identified something that has been widely practiced and theologically meaningful in India, but he has done so in a way that strongly misrepresents what he has actually presented. His claim that this is an example of “men and women physically marrying trees” is patently untrue, and he has presented it in a list of practices ranging from India to Germany, with no regard for the context, nuances, or disconnects between his examples. This flattens his data so that he is unable to distinguish the routine practices of everyday people from the sumptuous and idiosyncratic practice of the king, or between a holiday in India and a holiday in Europe. Ultimately, such a style of presentation means that there is nothing interesting to say about any of the practices: with their differences elided, all that can be said about each example is that it is generally related to plant-life, and that it seemed strange to the Victorian Briton who wrote the text.

⁹ For a nice discussion of *bhakti* devotion modeled on Radha and Krishna, see Chapter 7 of Fuller (1992).

In contrast to that first example, Frazer's second reference to tree marriage does actually put forward an example of people marrying trees—though this passage too displays a major disconnect between the evidence he musters and the ostensive argument of the section. This time, though, the interpretation fronted in the main text of the book interestingly contradicts the interpretation fronted in its own footnote. This reference falls on page 57 of volume 2, under the heading “Beneficent Powers of Tree Spirits,” and raises Indian tree marriage in the context of tree-related fertility rites in Europe. In the main text Frazer explains:

Some of the hill-tribes of India have a custom of marrying the bride and bridegroom to two trees before they are married to each other. For example, among the Mundas the bride touches with red lead a *mahwa*-tree, clasps it in her arms, and is tied to it; and the bridegroom goes through a like ceremony with a mango-tree.

The intention of the custom may perhaps be to communicate to the newly-wedded pair the vigorous reproductive power of the trees.¹⁰

Frazer's interpretation of magically transferring fertility, although it matches tidily to his section as a whole, is nevertheless immediately contradicted by his own footnote, which explains that “the practice is intended to avert possible evil consequences from bride or groom.”¹¹

In this quite persuasive footnote, Frazer goes on to catalogue a number of references that support this second theory—that tree marriage is for avoiding various negative effects of a problematic wedding. Frazer quotes at length from a Captain Wolseley Haig's report, “Notes on the Velama Caste in Barar,” from the 1901 *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, a text which identifies tree marriage as a way of circumventing a cultural presumption regarding multiple marriages. According to Wolseley Haig, the Velama people of India consider third marriages to be unlucky: thus, if a man who had already married two women wanted to marry again, he would invariably have trouble brokering this third, unlucky marriage. But if a man married a tree first

¹⁰ Frazer (1911) vol 2: 57.

¹¹ *Ibid*, note 4.

(identified as a *ru'i* or *madar* tree (*Asclepias gigantea*)), then the tree would be his third—and unlucky—wife, while the woman he wished to marry would be his fourth wife.

Likewise, Frazer's extended footnote cites a report drawn from E. Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* regarding a similar practice among the Vellala, who lived further south in India. According to this Vellala example, a man whose first or third wife has died will run into trouble arranging a second or fourth marriage, as the Vellala people considered second and fourth wives to be unlucky. In order to circumvent this difficulty, the widower may marry a plantain tree following his first marriage (and, if his third wife should die, an *erukkan* (*Calotropis gigantea*) plant), in order to make that tree and plant the second and fourth wives respectively. Doing so would mean that the second and third human wives are logically the auspicious third and fifth spouses.

These examples of tree marriage put forward in the footnote follow a logic quite different from either of the theories fronted by Frazer in the main text. Not only is this form of tree marriage unrelated to devotional activity, it is not even related to fertility. Instead, it is squarely based on attempts to navigate difficult social relationships between people, and this form of tree marriage would seem to offer a ritual solution to an otherwise intractable social problem. If we carry the logic of Frazer's own footnote back to the main-text example of the Munda marriage (where both the bride and the groom marry trees), it seems likely that this has much less to do with fertility than with the difficulties of human marriages, and that the ritual attempts to deal with that difficulty by deflecting it onto non-human partners.¹² Without further information about Munda marriage practices or emic interpretations of the ritual, it is difficult to speculate about what precisely the human social problem was, or what solution the ritual offered, but it seems

¹² Here, I follow a line of analysis advocated by Sherry Ortner (1978), in seeing ritual as a mode of solving difficulties inherent to cultural systems.

fairly certain that the ritual suggests something much deeper and much more interesting than a human desire to have children.

Following this complicated discussion, Frazer's third and final example of tree marriage is relatively straightforward and is, in fact, the only one to offer the promised "other parts of the East"—an example of tree marriage from Java. In this example, Frazer concocts a somewhat melodramatic dialogue between a palm tree and a man wishing to harvest its sap, culminating in the man pledging his troth to the tree by wrapping the tree in a rattan leaf and reciting, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet." Then, "[t]he maidenly and orthodox scruples of the tree having thus been satisfied, he embraces it as his bride,"¹³ and proceeds to harvest the tree's juices.

This example, like the tree marriage listed above, would seem to be once again not an example of religious devotion, or an example of primitive stupidity, but rather an example of ritual problem solving. Here, the ritual seems to be applied not so much to a problem between people within a marriage bond as between people and the natural world: it would appear that the people of Java recognized that agriculture and harvest demand a certain level of violence against nature in general and palm trees specifically, and it would appear that sap harvest became analogized to rape. Just as human sexual relations are regulated by marriage, and just as betrothals establish a man's honorable intentions towards a woman, so too could agricultural relations then apparently be regulated by 'marriage,' and thus betrothal could serve to establish a man's honorable intentions towards his tree(s). This example, then, would seem to come the closest to Frazer's suggestion that primitives blur the line between humans and non-humans, but not because they cannot tell the difference: rather it would appear that the palm-cultivators of

¹³ Frazer (1911) vol 2: 101.

Java were aware that their trees were trees, but that they maintained an active sense of ethical responsibility towards those palm trees, expressed and maintained through a ritual analogous to marriage.

It is important to note that Frazer's evidence makes no suggestion here that 'marrying' a palm tree would in any way replace marrying a person. There is no reason to suppose that the Javanese palm cultivator did not have a perfectly functional marriage with a human wife, or that he was even 'monogamous' to his tree: it may be that such a ritual was performed to establish relationships to any number of palm trees an individual man might cultivate. This suggests that while the metaphor of marriage was perhaps culturally potent on Java, readers ought not assume that the Javanese themselves extended that metaphor too far.

Altogether, then, in the three places where Frazer had announced that he proved tree marriage among people of India and other parts of the East, the text puts forward extremely interesting evidence in pursuit of deceptive and inadequate rhetorical purposes. Frazer actually offers not proof of the relationship of the King of the Wood to Diana, but rather three quite distinct models upon which to introduce non-humans into wedding rituals: first, utilizing plants and stones as symbols of gods, whose relationships are then acted out through the ritual; second, utilizing trees as a method for deflecting social problems between humans out onto the non-human realm; and third, utilizing the rituals of betrothal and marriage to establish moral relationships between people and the objects of their agricultural cultivation. Frazer has thus on the one hand succeeded at identifying something quite interesting—namely, that people place non-humans into human ritual roles. On the other hand, though, by flattening out and denying the differences between his examples, he has failed to say anything very meaningful about them.

II.

I would now like to put forward some of the examples of non-human (or mixed human/non-human) wedding rituals that I have come across in recent years as part of my experience living and working in Nepal. In this section, I will put forward three examples of non-human marriages I have witnessed, participated in myself, or heard about first hand from participants, and in the two sections following I will explain a few rituals that I have only read about.

To the best of my knowledge, the middle-hill people of contemporary Nepal (among whom I have done fieldwork—albeit unrelated to tree-marriage) do not actually marry full-sized trees. They do, however, stage a variety of weddings involving non-human brides or grooms, which in several ways illuminate or expand upon the evidence presented in *The Golden Bough*. I would like to discuss in this section three forms of non-human participation in weddings ritual in contemporary Nepal: the *ihi* ceremony, in which young girls marry *bel* fruits, and two variations on weddings involving *tulsi* basil plants.

The *ihi* ceremony¹⁴ is the wedding of a young girl and a fruit, a ritual commonly celebrated by families of Nepal's Newar community.¹⁵ *Ihi* is normally conducted when a pre-menstrual girl is an odd-number year of age (commonly 5, 7, or 9). The logic of *ihi* is that by marrying a *bel* fruit, the girl is taking god (either Krishna or Kumar) as her first husband. This

¹⁴ I unfortunately do not have any photos of my own of *ihi* rituals. There are, however, some photos available online:

<http://www.nepal-pictures.com/People-Ihi+or+bel+fruit+marriage>

http://www.eijsberg.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=21:ihi-in-nepal&catid=16:nepal&Itemid=34

<http://www.fotopedia.com/items/jmhullot-ca5a1c3f49a338366ffafa2a2e507849>

http://thomaskelly.smugmug.com/keyword/nepal./1/1182238931_vU9qp#1182238931_vU9qp-O-LB

¹⁵ The Newar community is an ethnolinguistic group native to the Kathmandu Valley, who practice both Buddhism and Hinduism, often in complex combinations.

means that the girl's human husband will be her second husband, and since her first husband was immortal, the girl will never be a widow. *Ihi* thus mimics the logic outlined in Frazer's second tree marriage example, insofar as it helps solve a problem of Nepali marital traditions: specifically, that Hindu women throughout Nepal are socially vulnerable to the fates of their fathers and husbands, and widows are intensely stigmatized. Hindu widows are not allowed to remarry, not supposed to dress nicely or wear jewelry/makeup, not permitted to participate in certain kinds of religious practice, and are dependent upon the good will of their fathers, brothers, or sons for their home and upkeep. But Newar girls who perform *ihi* never need to worry about this. Even if their human husbands die, their divine husbands do not, and so a Newar woman can continue to participate in society regardless of what happens to her husband.

Ihi is interesting in a discussion of tree-marriage overall, in that neither partner is really appropriate for a human marital relationship: the 'groom' is a small brown fruit, and the 'bride' is a little girl. Nevertheless, the wedding is performed very much as if the girl were a full bride. The girl is dressed in red—the wedding color in Nepal—and she is elaborately made-up and covered in gold jewelry. She is then brought to an open space (usually a courtyard) and married to the fruit in an abbreviated wedding ceremony. This wedding ceremony can include many of the gestures of a full adult wedding: generally, the girl must worship the fruit as she would worship her groom, and she will receive red *sindhur* powder in her hair (the most common mark of a Nepali married woman—the “red lead” of Frazer's gloss on Munda tree-marriage); sometimes families will sponsor full vedic fire ceremonies performed by an adult male priest, and often the girl's father will formally present her to the *bel* fruit in the ritual gesture known as *kanya daan* (the gift of a girl), one of the religiously meritorious rituals of Hindu traditions.

There is often dancing and feasting with family members—though on a smaller scale than for a full wedding—and some girls are given money, clothing, and jewelry.

The *ihī* is very much focused on the ‘bride,’ and the ‘groom’ receives a rather humble role by contrast. The ‘groom’ is a small brown *bel* fruit—a fairly common South Asian fruit (species *Aegle marmelos*), often translated into English as ‘wood apple’—which generally participates in the ritual as an inanimate image. The *bel* fruit receives no special status after the ritual, and is (from what I can tell) respectfully discarded at the end of the ritual. This highlights the fact that the purpose of the ritual is not to create a lasting girl-fruit partnership, but to protect the girl and ensure her social status against the possible instabilities and misfortunes of her future life.

A further difference between *ihī* ceremonies and normal marriages is that they are very frequently performed for several girls at a time. In fact, the only time I have personally been present at an *ihī* was when I stumbled across a mass-*ihī* in progress in Kathmandu’s Durbar Square in 2003: as I entered the cobbled courtyard wrapping around Kathmandu’s medieval royal palace, I discovered dozens of dressed-up little girls seated on strips of white cloth being coached through the ritual by their female relatives. This is not something that ever happens during full adult weddings, suggesting that although the rituals of weddings and *ihīs* are in some respects similar, that they are clearly understood as different kinds of events within the Newar community.

In addition to *ihī*, which to the best of my knowledge is unique to Nepal, Nepalis of my acquaintance also routinely celebrate weddings involving *tulsi* plants—much like the first example cited by Frazer. However, where Frazer describes in India a rather formal-sounding ritual celebrated by men, in Nepal basil-weddings (*tulsi bibaha*) are generally informal rituals

celebrated primarily by women.¹⁶ I myself participated personally at the *tulsi bibaha* celebrated by my landlady in October 2009 (in the Nepali month of Kartik), which she staged just outside her domestic worship room. She and I set up the basil plant on a ledge and lamented the fact that it had withered somewhat in the preceding week; when my landlady's sister-in-law showed up, she exclaimed, '*la, devata sukhisakyo!*' ("Gosh, god's already dried up!"), and all three of us laughed at the lamentable state of the plant. Then my landlady and her sister-in-law set about decorating the *tulsi* as a bride, which involved daubing red paste on the flower-pot using a marigold-blossom (and a little bit on each other), and then garlanding the *tulsi* with some red ribbon and a marigold garland I had made. My landlady brought out a small image of Krishna, which she put into the flower-pot; she sprinkled the 'bride' and 'groom' with water, lit an oil lamp and some incense, made some flower and fruit offerings to the pair, and recited a short prayer.

I do not know how typical this is of Nepali households generally, though I suspect it is if anything overly formal; my landlady is quite a devout woman, and spends upwards of two hours a day tending her household gods, praying, meditating, and visiting temples. What happened in my own household was not, however, apparently that unusual. I did notice that everywhere I went for the next few days, I saw spindly little basil plants—many as dried out and pathetic as our own—festooned with ribbons and flower garlands.

In fact, this commonly performed annual basil wedding is not the only time when Nepalis involve *tulsi* plants in weddings: *tulsi* plants can also be used during the course of normal human/human weddings, usually in order to deflect negative astrological predictions. These astrological predictions are usually drawn from birth-charts (*cheena*), which are drawn up

¹⁶ In *Guests at God's Wedding*, Tracy Pintchman similarly describes *tulsi* weddings in Benares, India, as being predominantly organized and performed by women.

for most Nepalis from the middle hills based on the alignment of the stars and planets at their moment of birth. The most important use of these star charts is during marriage planning: during the negotiations preceding a wedding, Nepali couples generally consult with an astrologer or guru to determine the quality of the match between the bride and groom's birth charts, and to assess the likelihood that some element of either party's birth chart might predispose the couple to conflict, illness, infertility, or early death.

This consultation is usually done after the match has been basically decided, and it is uncommon for an astrological mismatch to be reason to call off the wedding. Far more commonly, if there is some conflict between the bride and groom's star charts, the astrologer or guru will prescribe a way to mitigate the conflict—whether that be performing some special act of worship, such as fasting, making certain offerings, invoking a particular deity or wearing jewelry of a particular color—or in certain cases, marrying a *tulsi* plant.

Such a conflict of star charts came up in the 2009 wedding of the younger daughter of a Nepali family with whom I am quite close. The family is highly educated, affluent, and quite westernized; both the daughters now live in the United States, and both daughters have married Americans who are not of Nepali descent. When the younger daughter became engaged to her American husband, her mother had their family astrologer compose a star chart based on the date, time, and place of the groom's birth, and then had the astrologer assess the compatibility of the charts. The two charts were deemed to be astrologically incompatible, but according to the astrologer, this particular type of incompatibility (of which I did not learn the specifics) could be mitigated by including a precautionary symbolic wedding prior to the main wedding—the bride

could marry a *tulsi* plant, or the groom could marry a statue of a deity.¹⁷ In this particular case, the astrological imperfection was considered to be more on the side of the groom's chart, and so prior to the main wedding, the family priest performed a small, brief ceremony marrying the groom to a statue, in the hopes that this would draw off the negativities of his birth chart onto the god and leave his human marriage undamaged.

Taken together, then, in my own experiences living and working in Nepal, I have encountered several examples of wedding rituals conducted between human and non-human brides and grooms, roughly corresponding to two of the three models outlined by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*: acts of devotion, including occasions when basil plants are married to images of god (*tulsi bibaha*); and efforts to mitigate tensions within the social structures of human marriages to other humans, including both *ihi* (when a little girl marries a fruit in order to avoid the future danger of widowhood) and the practice of marrying a *tulsi* or a statue in order to avert astrological misfortunes. These practices are more or less routinely performed in Nepal today, in spite of the many social and cultural changes of the past century (as more and more Nepalis have come to be educated according to Western models and thus come to be skeptical of elements of their cultural heritage). The persistence of these rituals thus suggests that they are not aberrations or illogics as Frazer would have had it, not mere primitive idiosyncrasies to be easily swept away through training in European rationalism. Rather they continue to hold value to contemporary Nepalis—whether that value might lie in some profound theological import, a sense of tradition, or the fun of dressing up little girls and letting them play bride.

¹⁷ I find it peculiar that the basil plant appears to change gender in this case, relative to the regular Kartik practice outlined above (when it serves as the bride rather than the groom), but I was assured by the mother of the bride that this was the prescription.

III.

In addition to the human/non-human weddings I have had relatively direct contact with, I have also made note of two interesting recent examples of weddings between non-humans that were covered in the Nepali media. The first is an instance from Nepal, and the second is an instance from India.

In the first instance, in 2005 the inhabitants of Pawati village in eastern Nepal got together and staged a wedding for a pair of frogs. I quote the story in full as it was reported in *The Kathmandu Post*:

A pair of frogs was wedded amidst merriment Friday [June 3, 2005] to break the spell of drought. Youths, children and the elderly participated with great enthusiasm and enjoyed a sumptuous meal to mark the marriage ceremony. Sounds like a fairy tale? Yes, but it did happen at Pawati [village in Dolakha district] only recently.

The ceremony may have appeared like a fun event, but there was a genuine reason behind it. As legends have it, marriage between frogs leads to rainfall.

With paddy saplings turning pale and maize plants withering, Devi Prasad Koirala, 70, hit upon the idea, and the weary villagers agreed.

The villagers collected money, [and] bought two she-goats to offer at a local temple of goddess Ambikadevi. The “bride” frog was picked from the local Andheri stream while the “bridegroom” was brought from Ghyang stream.

After elaborate preparations, a large procession carrying the bride and bridegroom in palanquins headed towards the temple with great fanfare. A musical band playing the traditional *panche baja* [ceremonial instruments] led the procession.

On reaching the temple, the she-goat offerings were made and the marriage was performed as per Hindu ritual. The ceremony was no less than a Hindu marriage practiced in the countryside. Following the formal ceremony, the marriage party enjoyed a feast.

“Koirala said that such a ceremony had ended a similar drought in the past,” said Sher Bahadur Bhujel, a local youth.¹⁸

¹⁸ Rajendra Manandhar, “Frog wedding to break drought spell.” *The Kathmandu Post*, 6/4/05.

In this wedding ritual, both participants were non-humans, and the purpose would appear to be something akin to the primitive beliefs in ‘magic’ (of great interest to Frazer): specifically, inhabitants of the village of Pawati conducted the frog wedding in the hopes that the ritual would lead to rainfall. However, where Frazer would argue that such behavior is the result of failing to understand scientifically the processes of weather, the article itself claims that the villagers attempted this method because they were ‘weary’ of the drought. The lack of rain was jeopardizing their food security for the year, and while the villagers probably knew full well that there is no way (scientifically or otherwise) to *guarantee* rainfall, they may well have considered that they might as well try *something*. Additionally, it is interesting that the villagers tried this ‘something’ based at least in part on the evidence of one of the likely eldest members of the village, who claimed that a past frog wedding had correlated to, if not actually caused, rainfall.

In fact, since the frog wedding seems in essence to have been a village-wide party, it is hard to see why the villagers of Pawati *wouldn't* give the frog wedding a try: if the worst that could happen was that they all had a fun afternoon, and the best that could happen was that they had a fun afternoon *and* an end to the drought, the situation would seem to be win-win. This suggests to me two cross-culturally familiar impulses: first, that it always seems worthwhile to try something that *just might* contribute to a positive outcome, even if it's hard to see how the causality could possibly work (such as when sports fans wear lucky baseball hats); and second, that people hardly need an excuse to do things that are entertaining, like making a frog play dress-up.

As in the frog wedding, I suspect that entertainment is actually a much more common motive for performing rituals than theorists generally recognize, and that entertainment may well have been *the* dominant consideration in the unusual wedding held in Orissa, India, in February

2008. In this case, two families who had each adopted monkeys as pets decided to ‘marry’ the two monkeys and set them free in the local Jagannath temple. The family of the ‘bride,’ Jhumri, sent a marriage proposal to the family of the ‘groom,’ Manu, and two families proceeded as though they were negotiating the wedding of their human children.

On the day appointed for the wedding, they dressed the two monkeys up in abbreviated wedding outfits and lots of flowers, and, according to the CNN-IBN web coverage, the families were joined for a wedding procession involving a few hundred people and several musical bands. “I feel as if my own daughter was getting married,” Jhumri’s owner is quoted as saying.¹⁹

But of course, Jhumri’s owner knew that it was not her daughter who was getting married—that there are important differences between weddings for humans and weddings for monkeys. One of those differences may well have been that a monkey wedding is more entertaining, because a monkey wedding need not be serious in the slightest. While a human wedding has important social implications (forming a new householding social unit, altering relationships between parents and children, and in many Indian cases sending brides from the warm environment of their birth homes to the demanding environment of their in-laws’ homes), a monkey wedding has absolutely no bearing on future social relations. So the enjoyment of the wedding party need not be marred by any serious feelings, any significant sentimentality, or any real concern for the future happiness of the new couple. A monkey wedding may be as silly as it sounds: a chance to dress up, make a lot of noise, eat some fancy food, and send two very confused animals off into their new lives at the temple.

¹⁹ Jajati Karan, “Orissa villagers spend Rs 2 lakh to wed monkeys.”

<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/orissa-villagers-spend-rs-2-lakh-to-wed-monkeys/59742-3.html>

This link includes video footage from the Indian news broadcast of the monkey wedding.

IV.

For all of the examples I have reviewed so far, it would be possible to presume that when people conduct tree marriages, basil marriages, or monkey marriages, they are essentially preserving primitive ‘survivals’ of a past era. To put it another way, it might still be possible to imagine that that people in contemporary India and Nepal conduct rituals for non-humans because they have preserved a pre-modern sensibility about the world. This line of argumentation might even remain basically in line with Frazer’s arguments in *The Golden Bough*, even if it abandoned Frazer’s thorough-going chauvinism; indeed, one might be tempted to argue something far rosier, perhaps that people who marry fruits or who throw weddings for monkeys are simply people who have preserved a more authentic way of seeing people in harmony with nature, etc. etc.

But it is a mistake to assume that these sorts of rituals are a function of a pre-modern mentality. To demonstrate that tree weddings and monkey marriages need not be conceived as fundamentally pre-modern, I would like to point to an emphatically modern ritual example from Thailand—one which does not involve anyone marrying anything, but which does represent a quite creative extension of human rituals to non-humans. Specifically, in the early ‘90s, Theravada Buddhists in Thailand began ordaining trees as Buddhist monks, as part of an environmentalist campaign to save Thailand’s forests.²⁰

While there are a variety of instances of tree ordination reported in scholarly literature,²¹ I will here offer synopses of two particular ceremonies, which demonstrate slightly different political purposes in their performance. First, I will briefly gloss one of the earlier instances of

²⁰ Deforestation has become a major social and environmental issue in the past few decades, with rates of deforestation in Thailand the highest in all of Asia (with the possible exception of Nepal). (Darlington 1998)

²¹ See for example Hayami (1997) and Johnsson (1996).

tree ordination, conducted in July 1991, in Thailand's Nan province.²² This ceremony was organized by Phrakhru Pitak—the originator of the tree ordination concept. The ordination stretched over a day and a half and involved twenty monks from the surrounding area. The ceremony consisted of two major components, a gift-giving component and the actual ordination component. The first phase mimicked the more usual gift-giving process of an ordination, when members of the laity offer money or gifts to the ordinand and the monastic community more generally—a ceremony referred to as “the giving of the forest robe.”²³ For the tree ordination, however, Phrakhru Pitak did not have the participants offer money or robes; instead, he arranged for wealthy patrons and a local nursery to donate 12,000 tree saplings to the host-monastery. Following a ritual to consecrate these saplings, Phrakhru Pitak then redistributed the trees to the village participants, and encouraged them to go out and reforest the surrounding area.

Following this initial offertory ceremony, over 200 of the participants then went into the local forest to ordain the tree itself. The monks had selected the largest and oldest tree in the area, and prior to the ceremony had installed at the tree's base a plaque reading “To destroy the forest is to destroy life.”²⁴ The monks wrapped orange monastic robes around the trunk of the tree and chanted sacred texts over an alms-bowl filled with water. The monks then departed again from the usual ordination process: whereas in a usual human ordination this water would be sprinkled over the crowd, for the tree ordination Phrakhru Pitak requested that the headmen of the participating villages *drink* the water as a pledge to protect the forest.

²² I take this account from the first-hand narrative offered by Susan Darling (1998).

²³ This term relates not to the present context of the tree ordination, but to the ideal that monks should wander homeless through the world; monks who do not live in organized monasteries are typically referred to as “forest monks.” This may suggest a certain existing conceptual link between monasticism and forests, which could strengthen the semiotic connotations of the tree ordination.

²⁴ Darling (1998): 10.

This ritual thus mobilized the familiar ritual gestures of ordination for a new purpose. By directing the ordination ritual to an unusual non-human ordinand, the monks who organized it made a powerful argument about the social and moral status of the forest. The audience for this argument would appear to be the people of the local villages. The ritual was organized and orchestrated by the monks, and called upon the villagers to participate and form moral commitments through that participation. From the villagers who accepted seedlings to plant, to the headmen who drank the alms-bowl water, the participants in the ritual were called to pay attention to their familiar surroundings and to adopt a new model of interaction with those surroundings.

This first tree-ordination was thus essentially a top-down form of political activity, with elite, pro-environmentalist monks attempting to foster sympathy for their cause. By contrast, a tree ordination documented by Nichola Tannenbaum (2000) provides an example of tree ordination used as a grassroots model for villagers to press political demands upon the elite. According to Tannenbaum, people living in the northern Thai village of Thongmakhsan became deeply concerned in 1996 by preparations for a nearby gravel mining project, which would damage the local forest and likely end up polluting the local water supplies. At first, the villagers attempted to resolve their concerns through the mechanisms of the government bureaucracy: they met with the president of the provincial council, and circulated a petition, but when these more conventional modes of political action produced no results, they made plans for a tree ordination.

The Thongmakhsan tree ordination was explicitly modeled on past ceremonies, with a committee dispatched from the village to a nearby village that had recently held a similar ritual.²⁵ Moreover, the event was consciously engineered as a publicity stunt, with the timing selected

²⁵ Tannenbaum (2000): 119.

based on the calendar of the local government administration, and formal invitations sent out to the provincial governor and to local media.

The ordination itself followed the two stages of gift-giving and investiture much as above, but the gift-giving proceeded somewhat differently. Instead of giving and distributing physical trees, the people of Thongmakhsan collected cash donations which villagers then fashioned into a tree-sculpture to give to the local temple.

Following the gift-giving, the Thongmakhsan ordination featured several speakers who made presentations about the importance of forests and the reasons for ordaining trees. Then the monks who were present recited texts for the benefit and protection of the surrounding forest, and the monks and villagers together wrapped orange monastic robes around a number of the trees immediately surrounding the village temple. Then the participants all ate lunch together, and the ceremony concluded.

The Thongmakhsan ordination (in concert with a petition, a more conventional protest, and general media attention) was ultimately successful: the gravel project stalled, and was quietly cancelled. This suggests that between 1991 and 1996, tree ordination became a recognized idiom of environmental activism in Thailand; what seems to have started as a didactic effort to educate villagers and promote local sustainable forest use, transformed to a tool in the hands of villagers interested in blocking an environmentally harmful business project.

The movement to ordain trees is clearly of recent development, and in response to specific recent concerns about deforestation and rapid environmental degradation. Hence, it cannot in any way be construed as a pre-modern or 'primitive' ceremony. Tree ordination rather represents a creative use of an ancient ritual, one that mobilizes a surprising non-human presence to make a point about moral obligations towards the non-human world. By ordaining trees, these

Thai Buddhists were extending the authoritative stature of monks in human society onto forests, and thus arguing that those forests were not only party to human relationships but worthy objects of moral concern.

It is perhaps not even necessary to belabor the point that no one in Thailand was likely to misunderstand the ritual, or mistake a tree-monk for a human-monk. No one would have expected the ordained trees to go on alms-begging rounds or to meditate during the rainy season retreat. No one would have demanded that the trees should actually ‘wear’ the saffron robes presented to them. No one would have asked a tree to counsel them, perform a ritual for them, or recite a prayer for them. To return to the original discussion of *The Golden Bough*, then, this is where Frazer’s line of interpretation errs most deeply: Frazer presumes that human beings are intensely literal-minded, and that ritual behavior is primarily functional. That is to say, the error of the Frazerian interpretive scheme is that it does not leave adequate room for people to have complex understandings of ritual behavior, or to willingly suspend disbelief for the purposes of staging a ceremony.

I would not want to go too far the other way, however. Arguing that ritual is *not* literal or functional can lead to an opposite presumption: that it is empty, ‘purely’ symbolic, or meaningless. In the case of tree ordination, the people performing the ordination were being *both* symbolic *and* practical: they did not ordain the trees under an expectation that trees would make good monks, but they also did not ordain the trees just for fun. Rather, they hoped through non-literal and festive events to make a serious point about environmental responsibility.

But why make the point through ritual, rather than through more straightforward forms of argument and rhetoric? In fact, the people who staged these rituals *did* pursue more mundane lines of persuasion. Phrakhru Pitak spent years preaching pro-environmental sermons starting in

the 1970s,²⁶ and the villagers of Thongmakhsan started out by organizing a meeting with their local government representative. But these techniques actually did not work that well: they did not result in any change in the processes that were damaging the forests.

By contrast, when the monks and villagers in these two places retooled a familiar ceremony for an unfamiliar purpose, they seem to have caught people's imaginations, and brought people to pay attention to the pro-forest cause. Clearly, Thai Buddhists did not begin ordaining trees because they didn't know the difference between a person and a tree: rather, Thai Buddhists began ordaining trees because they wanted to disrupt the complacency of those people who presumed a stark difference between a person and a tree. The ritual was effective precisely because it was incongruous, because it took the ordinary and rendered it extra-ordinary.

V.

To complete this meditation on tree marriage (and tree ordination, not to mention basil-marriage and monkey marriage), I would like to introduce one final example. In November of 2007, P. Selvakumar of Sivagangi district in Tamilnadu, India, married a stray dog, Selvi. The groom had reportedly been advised to marry the dog to reverse a long string of negative events in his life, which his astrologer traced back to the fact that Selvakumar had thrown rocks at stray dogs in the past and injured them. For the ceremony, the dog was dressed in an orange sari and a flower garland, and between the gifts and the blessings she managed to wander off (requiring the groom to tempt her back to the wedding with some milk and a pastry).²⁷ The groom was apparently expected to care for the bride after the wedding, although one report indicated he still would be welcome to seek a human marriage partner.

²⁶ Darling (1998): 6.

²⁷ Foster (2007).

This story was reported as a ‘human interest’ story across the international media, and news footage appeared on Youtube.²⁸ This dog marriage was identified by many commentators as being a typical rural Indian practice (a modern gloss on ‘primitive’); the BBC, for example, could have been quoting from Frazer himself as it explained: “Superstitious people in rural India sometimes organise weddings to animals in the hope of warding off curses.”²⁹

What surprised me about this event, however, was not that the news industry found the story of the dog wedding titillating. Rather, I was surprised that I ended up talking about it a few months later with *Nepalis* who found it titillating. In particular, I recall discussing P. Selvakumar’s dog-marriage with my language tutor. My tutor is Newar—and I know he had organized an *ihī* ritual for his daughter when she was young. It struck me as strange that someone who had married his daughter to a fruit would find it strange that a man would marry a dog.

For me, I think what this final example points out is that it is possible to carry a socio-cultural analysis too far: it is tempting to take every peculiar practice from another culture and try to make sense of it as part of the culture as a whole. Often, this is a necessary approach, one which prevents superficial dismissal. In the course of living in Nepal, I have come to understand that many common practices that initially seemed strange to me belong to a relatively coherent and semi-systematized approach to the world—for example, Newari girls typically marry fruits because they are brought up to know that gods can be present even in mundane objects, through which they can interact with people, and that being a woman and a wife is a hazardous task. My landlady holds an annual wedding for her basil plants because she reveres Krishna, and because her ancestors and her neighbors all share(d) in the same practice.

²⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb2e3vH_O4I;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biWjKZ3oIWE>

²⁹ “Man ‘marries’ dog to beat curse.”

But not every practice belongs to a well-thought, principled approach to the world, and some practices seem strange to the other people participating in the same 'culture.' I think this means that an analysis of the behaviors of others must leave at least some room for people behaving idiosyncratically. Sometimes, it's just a guy who marries his dog.

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