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Response to Anne Mocko

I enjoyed this article immensely, and on two levels, the abstract/general/methodological (covered by the post-colonial title, “Encountering the Rituals of Others”) and the particular/data-rich/Nepalese (the pre-colonial, “On Tree Marriage”). On the first level, I liked the basic argument about the sophisticated ways in which putatively unsophisticated people set up their symbolic ritual worlds; I agreed with the interpretation, and with its political stance, and I was happy to see it presented so vividly and convincingly. On the second level, I loved all the stories about trees and, eventually, dogs, and I kept thinking of other stories that I knew that lent further support to Anne Mocko’s evidence. My response, other than to say, “Bravo!” is to tug a bit at the edges of the abstract, and to add more evidence to the particular.

But first I’d like to put in a good word for Frazer, who does rather well in the particulars but strikes out on the abstract level. All of Anne Mocko’s criticisms of Frazer’s encyclopedic approach are on target, but she has to admit not only that he has got a lot of the right stuff, in the form of correctly cited texts on subjects of interest to historians of religions in general, but that he has selected just the sort of things that she, in particular, is also looking for. I think we should pause to thank him before knocking him down, as others have done (most spectacularly J. Z. Smith in “When the Bough Breaks”ⁱ). I am admittedly prejudiced (full disclosure here), as I cut my teeth on Frazer from early childhood; my father used to quote the (admittedly snobbish) opening lines to me (“Who does not know Turner’s picture. . .”), and my mother left me her cherished first edition of the full text. That said, I would qualify Mocko’s statement that Frazer

found his “primitives” to be “simply *other*”; on the contrary, I think it is now widely acknowledged that the entire *Golden Bough* showed, and was designed to show, even against the wishes of its conflicted author, that all those primitive cults of dying and rising gods were not at all “*other*,” that they bore a stunning and (for some people) very uncomfortable resemblance to Christianity.

I would also modify Mocko’s delineation of her subject matter as consisting of rituals in which “at least one of the marital partners is not a person.” For surely the whole point of her analysis is that a tree, or certainly a dog, can be a person; better to say, “at least one is a human being.”

As for the particular, Mocko is absolutely right to associate the wedding of the frogs with rituals for rain. This tradition goes all the way back to the *Rig Veda*, where hymn 7.103 describes in luscious detail the chanting of the frogs at the beginning of the rainy season, likening them to chanting Brahmins. And she is right about the deeper meaning of the wedding of Selvakumar to a dog, though she might have gone deeper still, for the story is also about the relentless force of *karma*, the inescapable, if often delayed, effects of all actions: Selvakumar’s legs and hands had been paralyzed, and he had lost his hearing in one ear, after he “stoned two dogs to death and strung them up in a tree 15 years ago,” according to the newspaper report of the event. The wedding was designed to mitigate the effects not of a curse but of the man’s own acknowledged cruelty, a brutal violation of the doctrine of compassion for all creatures that the ritual, like many of the rituals in Mocko’s essay, was designed to express.

And the trees! Mocko’s insightful reading of these stories can be supported and extended by a number of tales from the classical Hindu tradition. A common motif in

Indian art and poetry is the *shalabhañjika* (“breaking off the Shal tree”), which depicts a woman clinging like a vine to the trunk of a tree, usually to promote pregnancy. And some of the stories about marriage to trees show the concern for class and caste that governs marriages between humans. For trees, like people, are divided into four classes: Brahmin [priest], Kshatriya [warrior], Vaishya [farmer/worker], and Shudra [servant].ⁱⁱ When the Kshatriya Princess Satyavati married a Brahmin, and the couple wished to have a son with Brahmin qualities, the priests told her to embrace an *udumbara* tree (a holy tree, a species of fig tree associated with the Brahmin class); but by mistake she embraced an *ashvattha* tree (“where horses stand,” another species of fig tree, belonging to the class of warriors, who ride on horses), and so her son, the great sage (and avatar of Vishnu) Parashurama, possessed inauspicious mixed qualities of both classes, and eventually wiped out the entire race of Kshatriyas.ⁱⁱⁱ

All of this supports Anne Mocko’s argument by pointing out that, not only are the Nepalese who married trees not idiotic children who did things for no reason or for stupid reasons (as Frazer thought they were—yes, yes, Frazer could be a brute), but they were drawing upon a tradition which they knew well, whether or not they could read or write, a tradition that was already ancient when Frazer’s ancestors were still swinging in trees in the Orkneys.

ⁱ Jonathan Z. Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” in *History of Religions* (Volume 12, Number 4, 1973), pp. 342-371; reprinted in *Map is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 208-40.

ⁱⁱ Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Varna System and the Origins of Caste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

ⁱⁱⁱ See “Headless Mothers, Magic Cows, and Lakes of Blood: The Paraśurāma Cycle in the Mahābhārata and Beyond.” Brian Collins, Ph D Dissertation, University of Chicago, June, 2010.