

Response to Mocko's "On Tree Marriage"

Benjamin Schonthal, PhD Candidate

University of Chicago Divinity School, History of Religions

I am grateful for the invitation to read and respond to this wonderful essay, which insightfully engages a scholar whose work serves as both a birth certificate and a death certificate for the field of religious studies, James Frazer. One cannot help but admire Frazer's enthusiasm for cataloguing myths, as one might admire the efforts of a dedicated stamp collector or numismatist. And one cannot but be awe-struck by the dynamic sprawl of an intellect unrestrained.

James Frazer's *Golden Bough* is to scholars of religion today what tree marriage was to James Frazer: entirely foreign in its substance, yet somehow recognizable in its deep structures. It exudes what another somewhat-suspect interpreter of religions, Sigmund Freud, might call *unheimlichkeit*. It is both familiar and unfamiliar to us. It cannot simply be ignored, on account of some vague intimacy we have with it. In short, Frazer haunts scholars of religion, which is why we find ourselves routinely revisiting his *Golden Bough* in an attempt to exorcize some small part of ourselves that we fear may be Victorian, chauvinist, ethnocentric and given to flights of undisciplined speculation. We especially hope to exorcize that most dreaded demon that rouses during extended periods of fieldwork or difficult translation and causes us to imagine with envy Frazer sitting in nineteenth-century Cambridge—presumably with a cup of tea and a pipe—reading leather-bound tomes about Javanese ritual or Norse mythology, serenely contemplating a 'unified theory' of myth and ritual.

But what should be our position vis-à-vis Frazer, or Muller, or any of the other scholars who shaped the field of Religious Studies, as *Religionswissenschaft*? In the last 100 years, many of these early works have become primary sources instead of secondary sources for us. They are

now objects for criticism, but not for evidentiary citation. Appropriately, we use these works as examples of larger historical, political and intellectual trends—just as Indian basil marriage serves as an example of Indo-European tree marriage mythology. But, are we in a better position then to evaluate what is “actually” happening when someone participates in an event, in which, it would seem, a person weds an herb that is tasty in pasta?

We certainly have better, more responsible methods of collecting data. We view and participate in practices *in situ*, learn liturgical and vernacular languages and engage in dialogue with practitioners about which we write. Yet, at the end of the day, our articles and books, not unlike Frazer’s, remain acts of interpretation, not of transcription. Moreover, in many places, including the place where I conduct my own research, Sri Lanka, those who participate in rituals and those who do not often offer what might be described as Frazerian readings of ritual, explaining particular ceremonies or parts of those ceremonies as secondary elaborations (or distortions) of some core ritual form, a divergence from an Ur practice.

In Sri Lanka, this reading of ritual frequently has been described as reflecting a “Protestant” vision of religion, particularly of the majority religion on the island, Buddhism. Protestant Buddhists, as scholars call them, view the ideal articulation of Buddhism as late-nineteenth-century Methodist missionaries or British civil servants might have viewed the ideal articulation of Christianity: oriented around sacred texts (rather than oral traditions), individual engagement with ethical doctrines (rather than ritual repetition of Pali stanzas), a notion of proper etiquette (such as cleanliness, punctuality, industriousness) and basic, almost austere, ceremonies free from worship of gods, demons or other supernatural beings. It is Buddhism as it may have been imagined by some of Frazer’s near-contemporaries, such as T.W. Rhys Davids, or Max Weber.

But, is this vision of Buddhism any more or less authentic than others? Scholars like Charles Hallisey, Kitsiri Malalgoda, John Holt and Anne Blackburn have convincingly shown that what we think of as Protestant Buddhism was not the product of one-way influencing, of Victorian ideals being transplanted into Sri Lanka. Instead, Protestant Buddhism was a collaborative venture, a product of shared goals, politics, and interests between certain monks and certain Brits—it was an instance of what Charles Hallisey terms “intercultural mimesis.”

The point is that the interpretations of ritual given by the likes of Frazer, Muller and others have never been simply quarantined in libraries waiting for a later generation of scholars to debunk or dismantle. They have been active out-there in the world and have altered the very objects that they were intending to describe, in a manner that would impress even Heisenberg. Indian people read Frazer, just like Javanese people. Frazerian ideas seep into the world, whether we like it or not. Is this false consciousness?

What we’ve lost with the now-complete critique of *The Golden Bough* is not only the viability of what must have been a very comfortable mode of doing research. We have also lost the transparency of ritual. For Frazer, ritual was a text legible to the academic. Today, we want to say more, to explain something about why people participate in rites. But, as Mocko points out beautifully, people participate in religious acts for any number of reasons, and often with changing or conflicted consciousness. Buddhists may assess their own rituals with respect to locally-negotiated “Protestant” norms. Participants *themselves* might explain their actions as meaningless, pointless or even not worthy of study. They may dissimulate or act instrumentally or in bad faith. They may feel both eager and bored. They may be confused. They may see their own basil marriage as an instance of something bigger—Indo-European tree marriage? “Hinduism”? “tradition”? —or they may not.

We are all haunted. There may be no *better* interpretation of ritual, only an ever-spiraling panoply of perspectives, unmoored from the placid harbor of the Myth-and-Ritual school. For post-Frazer scholars, as for a growing number of ritual actors, it's all very *unheimlich*.