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978-0-521-38735-4 - *Cosmologies in the Making: A Generative Approach to Cultural Variation in Inner New Guinea*

Fredrik Barth

Excerpt

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The problem

The great proliferation of ritual forms, cult organizations, and social structures found among the Mountain Ok provides a challenge to anthropological description, explanation, and theory. This extended essay is an attempt to analyse variations in ritual between cognate and contiguous Mountain Ok communities in a way that will provide insights into the forms of religion and society in an area, and raise theoretical questions as to how these can best be perceived and analysed.

Thus, the object of study in this analysis is not demarcated and conceptualized as ‘a culture’ but as a variety of culture – specifically, the varieties of cosmological ideas and expressions in a population of ‘neolithic’ cultivators and hunters in a recently contacted area of Inner New Guinea. To promote clarity of expression I shall sometimes use the term ‘sub-tradition’ to refer to the ideas which members of a local community or a single language group regard as true, and ‘tradition’ for the conglomerate stream of ideas and symbols of a plurality of genetically related and intercommunicating communities. These are not analytical but descriptive terms in my effort to account for how Ok ideas vary and are distributed between individuals, congregations, and local areas.

My focus is on the analysis of the content of this aggregate tradition of knowledge: the (variety of) ideas it contains, and how they are expressed; the pattern of their distribution, within communities and between communities; the processes of (re)production in this tradition of knowledge, and how they may explain its content and pattern of distribution; thus, the processes of creativity, transmission and change.

The main purpose of my effort is to develop the theoretical framework for this discourse. I cannot expect others to be as captivated by the particulars of the imagery and ideas of Ok peoples as I am after what I have experienced among them. So, in the tradition of most social anthropological writing, the main thrust is theoretical, not descriptive: I wish to contribute to the development of a comparative anthropology of knowledge. But again in conformity with that tradition, I attempt to develop such theory in constant confrontation with empirical data: I subscribe to a methodology that meets the challenge of fitting theory to the broadest possible range of facts.

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As a consequence of this hierarchy of purposes, the organization of the following text is one where I shift between sketches of data which serve to pose a problem, theoretical discussions which seek to develop a perspective on that problem, and further marshalling of data to illustrate or test what the theoretical proposals can and cannot achieve. This format has the drawback that the reader may feel at a disadvantage, suspecting that I produce bits of data and bits of theory only as these are most convenient for my argument. On the other hand, the sympathetic reader will recognize that a less tailored presentation would have other drawbacks in making the detailed ethnography even less accessible and its relation to the pro-and-contra arguments more opaque.

My point of departure is my own work in 1969 among the Baktaman (Barth 1975) – a Mountain Ok community of 185 inhabitants. Against a background of their daily life and activities I sought to describe their sacred symbols, cult activities and beliefs with special reference to their male initiations, and thereby to provide the lineaments of a secret and compelling world view characterizable as a mystery cult of fertility, growth, and ancestral blessing.

By 1983, about a dozen anthropologists have worked among cognate groups, and my wife and I have revisited for about three months' further work in the area in 1981/82.¹ There is thus a scattering of comparative material from a total population of c. 15,000 individuals, of six closely related language communities, occupying c. 10,000 km² of upland forests and mountains. In most outer respects, this population is reasonably homogeneous: technology, subsistence and economy are closely similar, based on shifting horticulture with an emphasis on taro, extensive hunting and collecting of forest and streambed products, and the raising of domestic pigs. Languages are closely cognate, physical type is indistinguishable. House type and dress are so similar that, apart from a few indicative details, photographs from one village could be used to illustrate life in another.

Despite this common base, religious practices and beliefs vary dramatically

¹ This revisit took place through the kind offices of the Institute of Papua-New Guinea Studies, and was financed by the Provincial Government of the Western Province, Papua-New Guinea.

The main sources for the materials on which I have built are thus the following (for references, see bibliography):

Regional: Barth, F. 1971 and field notes from 1967, 1968, and 1982. Craig, B. 1981. Pouwer, J. 1964.

Baktaman: Barth, F. 1975 and field notes from 1968, 1982.

Bimin-Kuskusmin: Poole, F.J.P. various published and unpublished writings.

Bolovip: Barth, F. field notes from 1982.

Imigabip: Jones, B.A. 1980.

Mianmin: Gardner, D.S. 1983.

Telefolmin: Craig, B. and Jorgensen, D.W. various published and unpublished writings.

Tifalmin: Wheatcroft, W. 1976.

Wopkaimin: Barth, F. field notes from 1982. Hyndman, D.C. various published and unpublished writings.

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as between groups and communities. Let me give some examples of this variation, to indicate the kinds of materials with which we are confronted and thereby the kinds of problems that arise.

Skulls as concrete symbols

All Ok people seem to practice what may be characterized as a cult of ancestors, using skulls and bones of the deceased as sacred relics.

Among the Baktaman, I found major relics located in two kinds of temples: a temple for hunting trophies and sacrifices for taro increase, in which also senior men reside (*Katiam*), and a non-residential temple for warfare and taro increase rites (*Yolam*). Clan ancestors, represented by fingerbones, clavicles, breastbones and mandibles contained in string bags are found in the various *Katiam* (*Kati*-house', etymology unknown) temples; and skulls, skull fragments, and long bones are located in the central *Yolam* ('Ancestor-house') temple. For the last twenty years at least, only *one* complete skull has served as the focal relic, placed against the inner wall between the two sacred fires. Though this skull is known to be of a particular clan, it symbolizes and represents the category of all ancestors; cult observances are directed towards this ancestor for all different ritual purposes and his forehead is painted white, red, or both, according to the nature of the occasion. There is no necessary connection between the clan of the presiding ritual leader and that of the relic, and the members of all other clans, despite their descent from ancestors deriving from separate events of creation, address their prayers to ancestors to this common relic and share their sacrificial meals with him.

In Bolovip, 30 km to the west within the same language group, where I spent a month in 1982, there are five skulls of four different clans in the central *Yolam* (and there are also two other *Yolams* in this large, residentially divided community). The skulls are divided into two distinct groups, placed to the right and to the left respectively: two are *imename* (*imen* = taro) and three are *wúname* (*wún* = arrow). The former are used collectively for taro and fertility cult only, and are painted with a white line on their foreheads; the latter are for warfare cult and are painted red only; no skull should be painted both white and red (I return below, pp. 51 f. to the deeper significance of this rule). The ritual leader, and other initiated persons present for ceremonies and sacrifices, must only present prayers and offerings to the skull of their own clan; or if their own clan is not represented among the skulls, then only to the skull of their mother's clan, or that of their father's mother.

All such information, and entrance to the cult houses, are strictly limited to appropriately initiated men: knowledge and participation are treated as terrible and vital secrets. Fortunately, word of my initiation among the Baktaman thirteen years earlier had spread to Bolovip, so I was allowed into these inner sanctuaries and could collect detailed information despite the shortness of my

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visit. Sitting in the temple one evening, I was told with a mixture of sensationalism and disgust: ‘You will not believe this, but we are not lying: In Imigabip (the neighbouring community, 10 km to the west) they have a *female* skull in their temple!’ Use of female skulls is also confirmed for Telefolmin (Craig 1981). Among the Bimin-Kuskusmin, only 30 km (of very rough terrain) north of the Baktaman, indeed, their ethnographer (Poole 1976) reports the crucial place of broken female skulls among the *sacra* also of the clan temples!

Mafom initiation

Other dimensions of contrast may be illustrated with respect to major symbolism in initiations. A widely distributed initiation among Mountain Ok (and indeed also among peoples of other language families south-west of the Ok areas) centres on the construction of elaborate pandanus wigs for the novices, and the use of red body paint. This initiation, called *Mafomnang* among the Baktaman, occurs as the fourth step in their series of initiations. The red paint for the occasion is made of a secret mixture of red ochre, the juice of the large red pandanus fruit (*P. conoideus*), and a strongly red-staining bark extract, mixed with a base of melted pig’s fat from a sacrificed village pig. The result is applied to the face and body of each novice, and the ‘male’ part of the wig, leaving the ‘female’ part of the wig as the only unpainted part of the novice.

The Bimin-Kuskusmin have a similar complex of pandanus wig, red colour, and fat associated with their sixth, seventh and ninth steps of initiation (Poole n.d.: 54). The fat is from the wild male boar, which according to Poole represents semen. This is a stark contrast to Baktaman conceptions: though wild male boar is an enigmatic symbol for them (Barth 1975: 201f.), it is above all the embodiment of vigour and virility as an *opponent*, as the great despoiler of taro gardens and categorically opposed to the forces of fertility and increase. Domestic pigs’ fat, on the other hand, (only sows are kept beyond the piglet stage, and domestic stock thus depends on wild boar for impregnation) represents the anointing blessing of ancestors in various initiatory contexts associated with increase and growth.

Among the Telefolmin, on the other hand, this emphatically ‘male’ red paint of both Baktaman and Bimin-Kuskusmin is secretly associated with menstrual blood (the secret name for red ochre, cf. Jorgensen 1982: 10) and menstrual blood from a currently menstruating woman is even added to the concoction (*ibid.*)² Any such admixture among the Baktaman would be completely destructive to the integrity and good-sacred properties of cult equipment and activities; while among the Bimin-Kuskusmin it would appear to be ‘ungram-

² Whereas the Tifalmin, an easy day’s walk from the Telefolmin, make the secret equation of red and pandanus and male sexual secretions, cf. Wheatcroft, 1976.

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matical', as menstrual blood is characteristically represented by black rather than red colour.

It is no doubt necessary to be somewhat attuned to these cults and symbols to realize the full impact of contrast and shock that such differences generate. Clearly, in a certain sense the symbolic objects and acts that I have picked out here are of a kind, though opposite; but they also enter so deeply into an elaborate set of connected meanings and ritual statements as to dramatically explode and destroy this common base. If one were to imagine a Christian from one English village who entered the church of a community some miles away and found an image of the devil on the crucifix, and the altar wine being used for baptism, this seems the closest analogy I can construct. But by no means do all the contrasts have this stark character of inversion. In other cases, sacred symbols explicitly elaborated by some Mountain Ok communities are left entirely tacit or unelaborated by others.

Thus for example *fire*. This serves the Baktaman as the vehicle for sacrifice, and there seems to be a certain awareness among them of an imagery of analogy between sacrificial smoke in the temples and the smoke of the swiddens in the gardens – but otherwise fire is not developed as a ritual idiom. The making of fire is a male prerogative, and a secret formula to promote its making refers to the small marsupial mouse *ubir*; but *ubir* does not figure among the large set of marsupials hedged by taboos and employed for secret sacrifices on various levels of sacredness.

From the Tifalmin, by contrast, Wheatcroft (1976) provides an elaborate description of the place of firemaking in third degree initiation, associated with male maturity and virility (corresponding to the *Mafomnang* mentioned above). At a stage in the proceedings, fire is made on the chest of the novice, using the nest of the small *wabil* marsupial (presumably cognate with the Baktaman's *ubir*). This fire-making act is mythologically associated with the Afek creator-mother myth, which constitutes the core of cosmological beliefs among most of the Mountain Ok communities (but not among the Baktaman). But other associations are also indicated: the senior who rubs the fire-making equipment is having *his* buttocks rubbed by another senior man with the wing of the fruit-bat (another multi-valent animal symbol, both among Tifalmin and Baktaman), while the congregated seniors sing: 'Oh sacred fruitbat penis: it comes and goes!' until, at the culminating moment as fire is created, they break out in: 'through the buttocks, the glowing tinder lights; oh fire!'

Finally, even the major modes in which religious and cosmological ideas are expressed differ between Mountain Ok communities. Among the Baktaman, hardly any myths are told or known, and a rich flow of multi-vocal non-verbal expression is only minimally accompanied by short cryptic verbal statements and songs, and hardly ever given even the most rudimentary verbal exegesis. Among the Mianmin – peripheral Mountain Ok on the north slope of the cordillera – a greater corpus of myths is found (Gardner 1983: 352), but they are

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not central to the religious events, which involve essentially the revelation of ancestral relics, the utterance of secret names, and the singing of sacred songs. The Bimin-Kuskusmin, on the other hand, maintain an enormous corpus of secret myths organized in elaborate cycles, which are told as central parts of cult and initiation rites, and are also regularly commented, in appropriately secluded settings, in extensive verbal exegesis.

Let this serve as a provisional sample of the ethnography, and the kinds of local variation which it provides. How should an anthropological description and analysis of such a complex field best proceed? In contrast to Frazer's day, it is now an anthropological commonplace that the different beliefs and practices found in a culture are closely connected as a system, and that both their description and their meaningful interpretation must proceed with reference to this context and in terms of these connections. So the anthropologist gives a close description of the elements in the culture of a group, and through analysis constructs an account which reveals how the bits fit together. Alternative contemporary recipes for the present case would have to be: (1) Stick to one place only, and give a consistent and orderly account of the interconnectedness of all the bits in that one jigsaw-puzzle. (2) Make a series of functional or logical models for a range of different communities within a larger, delimited area, and work out a classification or typology for the systems found within that area. Or, perhaps most challenging, try with Lévi-Strauss to (3) construct a single model which, by inversion, transposition, and other logical transformations, can generate as many as possible of these forms.

The criterion of success in all three alternatives depends on how much *order* one can discover in the data and depict as logical consistency in one's account. Now this criterion is not as silly as it may sound – it is not that the question of degree of order in cultural phenomena is not recognized as a possible empirical question by modern social anthropologists. But by what available methods might one investigate the degree of disorder, and document its extent, in such a way as not to expose the author of the analysis to accusations of incompleteness of material and failure of adequate analysis? The issue is appositely illustrated by the correspondence in *Man* following Ron Brunton's courageous article 'Misconstrued order in Melanesian Religion' (Brunton 1980a). Though the discussion focussed on materials from a group unrelated to the Ok it is directly relevant to our concerns here. The discussion led essentially to the formulation of two positions and one set of misgivings.

- (1) The orderedness of the material is far greater than anthropologists are wont to believe. It is for us to assemble all the bits presented piecemeal by the chance sequence of events and the incomplete confidences of the informed natives. Secret myths provide the key to explanation, and will, if the ethnographic endeavour is successful, reveal the logical completeness and unity of a secret and sacred world view (Juillerat, 1980: 732ff).

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- (2) A true reading of ritual depends, not on ferreting out the secret native explanation, but on showing how the rites reflect the constitution of the local social universe: its groups and statuses, and their relations. It is for us to represent these two aspects of native life so that their isomorphy is revealed (Gell, 1980: 735ff).
- (3) The third, non-position, could marshal important insights and objections to both preceding positions; but it did not seem able to articulate a theoretical position that provided a coherent alternative viewpoint (Jorgensen, 1981; Johnson, 1981; Brunton, 1980b).

How do these viewpoints stand up, and how might they serve us for our present purposes? To Juillerat and the exegetical school, one might first object that to show that myth and rite say the same thing hardly resolves the old debate regarding the priority of the two (cf. Leach 1954: 13f) or indeed that they should not both find their source and explanation in some unidentified third factor. And more specifically to the present material: it is true that in a secret tradition it takes good personal rapport and much thoughtful questioning and reflection to avoid the deceptions whereby the integrity of secrets are defended, so the anthropologist is told authentic myths. The poverty or disorder of such data in the notebooks of any anthropologist is thus a very weak indicator of the degree of elaboration and orderedness of myths in the sacred lore of a community. But as I have tried to show in my Baktaman study (Barth 1975; esp. 217ff), the sacralizing import of secrecy in these traditions also has a profound effect on the epistemology of native thought. The *force* of the rites, as mysteries, depends precisely on how the practice of secrecy moves every form of absolute truth out of reach and places the congregation in a relation to the vital and awe-ful category of the unknowable as the essence of mystery. It is surely a very naive and literal rendering of such a tradition to regard the least widely known version of each myth as the truest! (cf. Jorgensen 1981).

To Gell and the Durkheimian school which sees ritual as a reflection of society: it is surely unsatisfactory to argue purely from the isomorphy between (certain features of) rites and (certain features of) society, without regard to what local people may say. Their interpretations are not just a (questionable) source of *ad hoc* sociological ideas; they are in a constitutive sense 'what their rites say'. I am not arguing that the significance of rites is exhausted by regarding them as communication only (cf. Lewis 1980: 16ff), and even less that 'an informed native's' verbalized account of their purported content is compelling (Barth 1975: 228). But I am arguing that the cognitions and emotions communicated through rites are a very significant component of their meaning – to wit in this particular material, that Baktaman and other Mountain Ok rites are ways of grappling with understanding pandanus, marsupials, fertility and cosmos, and not merely reflexes of society – and so must be analysed for the tradition of knowledge which they sustain.

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Secondly, and analogous to my critique of the exegetical school, I see no compelling argument for reading isomorphy as a causal link *from* society *to* the form of rites – a point to which I shall return below, chapter 8. And most strikingly, in both viewpoints I see the same weakness that explanation is linked with the premise of an encompassing logical order. Once this premise has been adopted, local variation becomes essentially uninteresting – it serves at best to expand the field of myths in which one searches for ‘the’ key, or it adds further isomorphies without illuminating those already found any more profoundly. But most crippling of all, these viewpoints entail that local variation must be reduced and controlled by delimiting the object of study. The analytical argument in both the exegetical and Durkheimian school depends for its force on isolating the object of analysis as a closed system, and making all of its parts fit, like the jigsaw puzzle. How could we hope to make such methods and templates serve us in the task of analysing and understanding the jungle of variation that you have glimpsed from my brief illustrations of a few features of Mountain Ok beliefs and practices? And indeed, how could we hope to capture essential insights in any tradition of knowledge and any extant society by imposing the patently untrue assumption of closure as our methodological premise?

The example of Lévi-Strauss, when he ranges over continents in his parallels and inversions of myths (Lévi-Strauss 1966b), might seem more appropriate for our purposes. But I cannot accept the ontological basis on which he pursues such far-flung comparisons. I feel intuitively committed to an ideal of naturalism in the analytical operations I perform: that they should model or mirror significant, identifiable processes that can be shown to take place among the phenomena they seek to depict (Barth 1966:v). What this entails is an admonishment that we must always struggle *to get our ontological assumptions right*: to ascribe to our object of study only those properties and capabilities that we have reasonable ground to believe it to possess. On this particular issue, that means we should be able to show that the cultural materials we connect by operations of transformation could indeed be thus related in their historical genesis, and that the operations of transformation we perform are indeed modelled from empirical events. Lévi-Strauss’s methodology provides us with no guidelines in this respect.

In the case of Ok ritual material, however, I feel I have good reason to represent the traditions of distinct communities as genetically and historically connected and somehow transformable into one another. At the big rituals and initiations throughout the area, it is common for delegations of senior ritual experts, and frequently for novices from other groups, to arrive from considerable distances to be present. Thus a network of participation connects all centres and all major events throughout the area. Visitors are certainly sometimes deeply surprised and shocked at what they see in the occult performances they may attend in strange and distant places. Thus, for example, a Baktaman

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who had once attended a major Bimin-Kuskusmin rite seemed still, long after, highly ambivalent, and afraid and unwilling to discuss the matter at all. Yet, even such shock and fear is, in the Ok ambience, a suggestive religious experience; and the rituals of other neighbours, more frequently visited, will generally be more compatible and apposite to a villager's local imagery and interests. Thus, there is an undeniable sharing of a wider stock of ideas than those embodied in the rites of one's own community, and a potential whereby cultural materials can be, and clearly sometimes are, passed on to other communities and adopted or transformed by them. This provides the rationale for studying the many local traditions under a unified perspective – but to do so, we need to construct that perspective. This means identifying the empirical processes whereby the cultural materials in question are produced and transformed. For this purpose it is not enough merely to appeal to the theoretical construct of *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss 1966 a): we must also provide the empirical evidence of what is in fact the process whereby cultural expression is constructed in the particular societies and domains we are treating.

What is more, the models on which Lévi-Strauss's exemplary logical operations and transformations are performed are all highly abstracted and rather limited in scope. I see no way to model the features of both ritual expression and social organization in the various Ok communities with sufficient complexity to retain the empirical features that interest me, yet give the models the required simplicity and closure to allow for the operations of transformation that are the essence of a Lévi-Straussian analysis. The adoption of his procedure would thus force us to interpret and represent Ok thought and life in categories so far removed from their own conceptualizations as to entail an extreme loss of naturalism also in our very account of these cultural facts.

My own previous analysis of Baktaman ritual, now strengthened in my view by the accounts provided by other anthropologists analysing cognate traditions, focussed on an attempt to discover the meaningful structures, and the message content, of the rituals practised among them. A critical study of these materials forced me to recognize that Ok ritual is primarily cast in an analogic code, rather than the digital codes exemplified by computer languages and assumed by most structuralist analyses of natural languages, myths, and rituals. Though it has been fairly widely recognized that ritual builds on metaphor (in the more conventional sense of e.g. Ricoeur 1978 rather than the highly abstract Lévi-Straussian sense of metaphor vs. metonym), anthropologists have been very reluctant to draw the analytical conclusions that must follow from this view. For an extensive discussion of these issues, however, I must refer to my Baktaman monograph (Barth 1975).

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**An attempt at systematic comparison:
descent and ideas of conception**

Since I thus reject the three procedures that I find characteristic of contemporary social anthropological treatment of problems such as those raised by Ok ritual and cosmological variation, I am forced to proceed more patiently and construct my own methodology through a stepwise, tentative description and analysis. For this, we need some kind of systematic procedure for representing the forms, and ordering them in relation to each other with respect to morphological features: we need a comparative methodology. It is a striking fact that, great as the emphasis has always been in anthropology on presenting our discipline as comparative, there is no established procedure which could be named 'the comparative method' (cf. Kuper 1983: 197ff). Comparative exercises have been pursued from very different premises and with very different purposes in mind. A range of descriptions may be laid out to build a taxonomy; the presence/absence of features may be mapped to depict distributions, often as a basis for constructing a quasi-history of cultural diffusion based on the age-area hypothesis; or a few cases may be idiosyncratically selected and compared, to illustrate structural contrasts or similarities.

Nadel's discussion of co-variation (Nadel 1951: 229ff) comes closest to defining a procedurally clear and rigorous methodology. Let us try to apply it to our present case. Nadel sees the comparative study of variation as the essential tool for anthropological analysis. Without reducing the emphasis on the holistic or systemic *description* of cultures and societies, he argues for the comparative testing of propositions stating necessary interconnectedness between *certain features* of such systems. He rejects, moreover, a *ceteris paribus* clause. Indeed, to arrive at valid generalizations regarding the causal or reciprocal determination of forms evidenced by systematic co-variation, Nadel stresses that the other features of society which do not enter into propositions of co-variation should specifically *not* be equal. Otherwise, the correlations depicted as co-variation may simply reflect some other, unrevealed, factor in these surrounding features.¹ Nadel's methodology should thus equip us to test

¹ It should be noted, from Nadel's own illustrations, that he is not concerned to establish mere correlation between particular 'traits', but connections between major institutions: age set organization, clan segmentation, and warfare; residence rules and joking relations; etc.