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CONTRADICTION AND FORGETTING IN YEWÉSSEY CULTURE

Anthropologists are now inescapably aware of conflict, contradiction, and negotiation in even the most seemingly "traditional" socio-cultural orders. The literature on "memory" is particularly rich in illustrations of how contradictory evocations of the past undergird conflicting performances and assertions of interest in the present. This study of the traditionally nomadic Yewéssey people documents a genre of performance seldom discussed in the anthropological literature—the ritual performance of *forgetting* as a means of resolving intractable conflicts and cultural contradictions. This essay is written with an undergraduate or lay audience in mind and is intended to introduce anthropological comparative method, and some of its most important vocabulary, in accessible language. Questions for classroom discussion are provided at the end.

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Anthropologists typically study other societies and try to explain how the people in them organize their lives, what things are important to them, and why. Anthropology has, however, changed in recent decades. Whereas we once tried to represent cultures as sets of internally consistent patterns, conventions, norms, and traditions that everyone in a given tribe followed, we have now realized that contradictory principles can prevail in a single society. For example, in some tribes, a tribal elder might lovingly call a person a *son* of the tribe, but then sell that person for trade goods. A tribal leader might wax poetic about *freedom* while persuading his followers to confine his enemies, or praise equality while making sure that certain clans remain the perpetual doormats of the tribe. These are the sort of contradictions that can hold sway in a single society.

Sometimes the anthropologist just has to dig deeper to figure out what a tribe is really getting at, underneath their public words. Sometimes tribespeople are entirely unaware of the underlying structure of their lifeways, or they have to forget the evidence of that structure in order to keep a good conscience.

Lately I have had occasion to study a highly unusual but fascinating tribe that illustrates these principles well. They occupy the savannas and hills stretching between the rainforest habitat of the Nootka and the original rainforest habitat of the southern Muskhogean-speakers (see map). My research on them is admittedly preliminary. I have yet to speak to many of the chiefs, but I have spoken to several of the priests and their assistants. I have interviewed more women than men (for it is the women who tend to find me more naturally charming). And I have interviewed more members of the lower moiety than of the upper.

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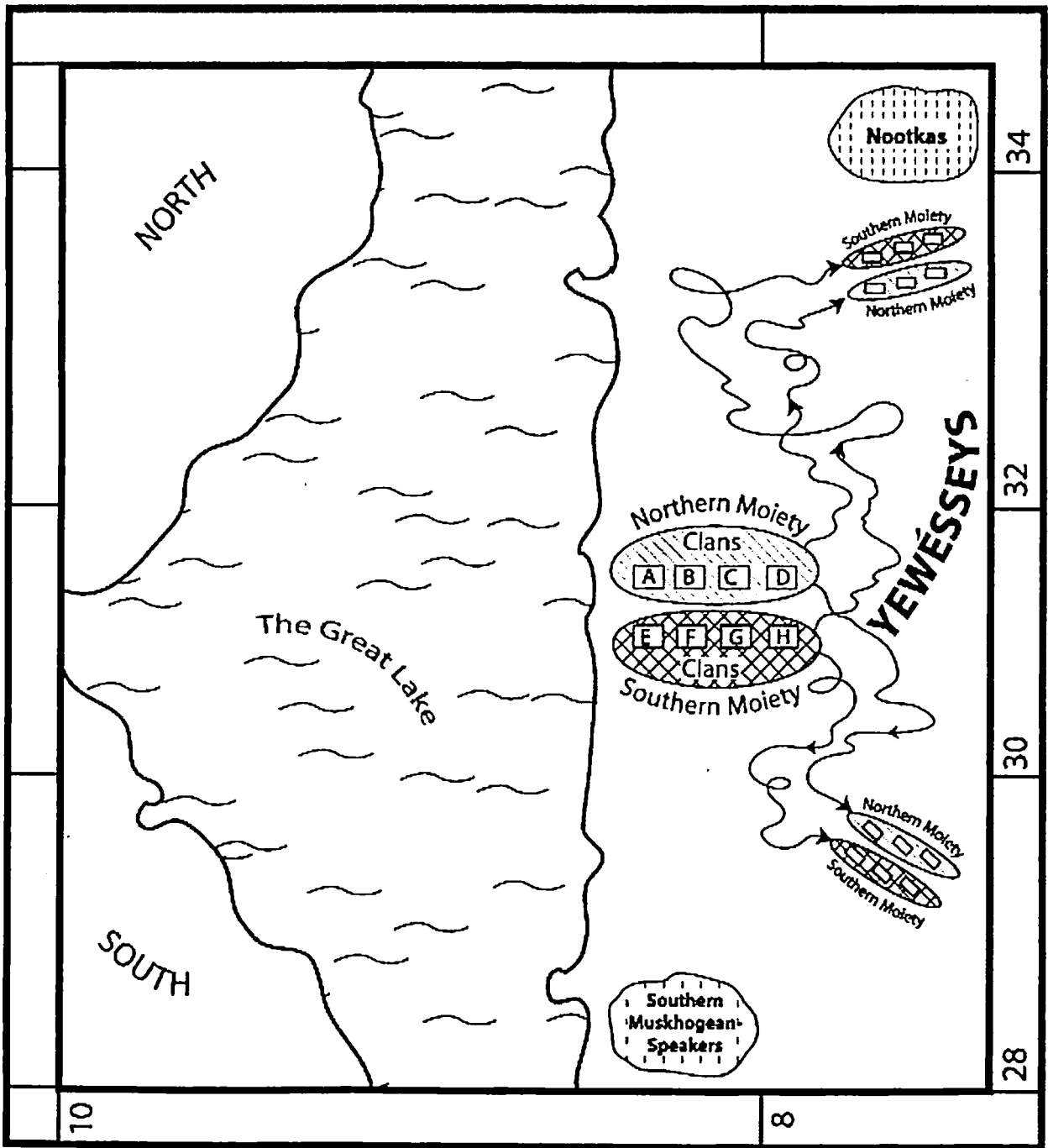
THE BILATERAL MOIETY SYSTEM

Moiety comes from a French word meaning *half*. Societies with this form of organization are divided into two parts (see map). Among the Yanomami of Venezuela and Brazil, for example, a boy is born a member of the same moiety to which his father, his father's father, his father's father's father, and so forth all belonged. They all live on the same side of the village. However, the boy grows up to marry someone of his mother's moiety. In fact, all of these men's mothers came from the opposite moiety. As you can imagine, the men of that second moiety will, in turn, marry women of the first moiety. This is called a patrilineal moiety system. There are other tribes with a similar form of organization, but in them, a boy is born a member of his mother's moiety, and marries a woman of his father's moiety. This is called a matrilineal moiety system.

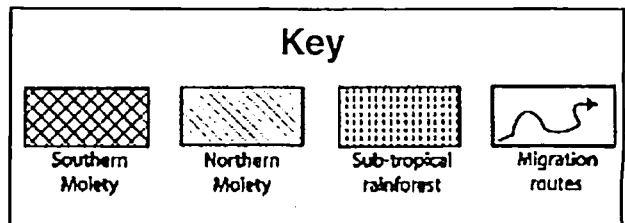
In either case, the moiety system of social organization generates two hereditary groups that continue across the generations. In such societies, one moiety typically lives on one side of the village, while the other moiety resides on the opposite side.

In some of the societies divided into two hereditary groups, membership is inherited bilaterally (that is, on "both sides"). Hence, a person belongs not just to the moiety of his father or his mother, but to the moiety of both his father and his mother. In these cases, a boy marries a member of his same moiety. Of course, the Yanomami would consider this practice of marrying within one's moiety incestuous, abominable, nauseating, and repulsive. However, the tribes that practice the incestuous bilateral moiety system consider it necessary for the maintenance good social order and ritual cleanliness, or proper relations with their god.

As the map illustrates, even when members of the Yewéssey tribe migrate to new settlements, they tend to preserve the residential separation between moieties. The members of the Northern moiety will typically live among themselves, and the members of the Southern



Yewéssey Migration Patterns



moiety will typically live on the opposite side of the village.

Some members of the bilateral moiety system I will describe—particularly those most tightly organized around the worship of the tribal god—practice extensive inbreeding not only within their moiety but even within their kindreds. They are fully aware of the physical deformities and weaknesses that result from this inbreeding—ranging from one moiety's extreme susceptibility to skin cancer to the high incidence of dwarfism and polydactylism among certain of its religious subgroups.¹ But, as all students of anthropology know, cultural preferences are seldom dictated by biological or material necessity.

As an anthropologist, I ask you not to judge this tribe harshly, because, to us, all cultures deserve equal respect. Our job is to understand, not to condemn. And even if, in the end, ethics require us to intervene against some of the tribe's more grotesque and cruel violations of human rights, our efforts will be ineffective unless we first understand why the natives believe in their system, why they have remained committed to it for so long, and therefore how we might persuade them to seek alternatives.

Out of my own professional and personal respect for my friends of this culture, I have chosen to use some fictive names. Therefore, I can feel more at ease in divulging one of the holiest secrets of the Yewéssey Cult of Forgetting. In the bilateral moiety-based society I will be discussing, despite its rules of moiety endogamy, there has long been a great deal of sexual activity between the moieties. However, it is considered highly illicit. When evidence of it is seen, it is typically greeted with extreme disapproval. The tribal god is said to be against it, and, in the past, tribesmen of the Southern moiety could be executed, castrated, and dismembered on the mere suspicion that they had solicited sex from a female of the Northern moiety.

In fact, the tribesmen so executed had seldom committed the infractions of which they had been accused. More often, they had simply gained control of more land or inert metals than was allowed to those of their moiety. And, so potent a symbol is sex in this bilateral moiety system that allegations about their sexual conduct became the incontrovertible public excuse for their execution and dismemberment. In these cases, the mob of executioners would celebrate their restoration of proper social order and, often, preserve the victim's body parts as relics, heirlooms, and proof of their commitment to the divinely prescribed tenets of their social order.

The reader might find these primitive social practices abhorrent, but it is the anthropologist's job to ask "how?" and "why?" And we use cross-cultural com-

parison to locate the answers. So, first of all, it must be pointed out that there is nothing unusual cross-culturally about human sacrifice.² The ancestors of the Incas, the Aztecs, the Irish, the English, the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Chinese, and the Hawaiians have all practiced it. The mythic charters of Judaism and Islam report that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son was the condition of the people's covenant with God. Christians regard the sacrificial killing of Jesus Christ as the greatest thing their god ever did for humankind, and Roman Catholics say they literally eat Jesus' flesh every weekend. Nor is the obsessive regulation of people's real or imagined sexual conduct an unusual way cross-culturally of regulating the social order.

HIERARCHY AND EQUALITY IN THE YEWÉSSEY MOIETY SYSTEM

What is unusual about the Yewésseys is that most societies that practice the moiety system are egalitarian on all matters but gender. That is, they regard all the members of the tribe as possessing equal rights to tribal resources: All men have the right to the powers controlled by men, and all women have the right to the powers controlled by women.

Like other moiety-based societies, the Yewésseys do profess a public ideology of egalitarianism among all the members of the tribe, but the extraordinary opprobrium they heap upon sexual relations between the moieties and the even greater disapproval of intermarriage are dead giveaways of this tribe's structural commitment to hereditary inequality between the moieties. The moiety system of the Yewésseys thus bears much in common with the caste systems that forbid a respectable Hindu from marrying a Dalit, or *Untouchable*, and prevent a respectable Japanese person from marrying an Ainu or a member of the Buraku caste. A similar caste system prohibits a respectable Nigerian Igbo from marrying a member of the sacrificial *Osi* caste or of the *ibe osim*, or part-slave, clan.

Among the Igbo, this latter caste was traditionally not allowed to own land, and its female members were supposed to be available sexually to any man of another clan and had no recourse even against forcible sex. After the *osim* had been freed during the colonial period, their position improved somewhat, but they were still discriminated against socially. For example, although men sometimes married *osim* (or *part-slave*) women, such men refused to pay bridewealth, for fear that supernatural retribution for marrying a *slave* might cause them to fall ill or die.³ The Igbo provide a good example of how outcaste groups (and extreme prohibitions on marrying a member of one of them), can mark the boundaries of an otherwise extremely egalitarian and traditionally democratic group. Thus, in the end, we

might find some sensible explanation for the coincidence of (1) extreme forms of ascriptive hierarchy amid (2) public emphasis upon egalitarianism among the Yewéssey people as well.

Egalitarian societies often set their limits just this side of some visible internal caste, ethnic group, or minority. Such limits are symbolically even more powerful than territorial boundaries. Such internal caste boundaries dramatize the fiction that everybody on this side of the boundary is alike. By contrast to the visible castes, ethnic groups, and minorities internal to a tribe, the tribe's territorial boundaries are usually invisible to and far away from most of its members. Internal castes are usually closer and more visible, and are experienced on a daily basis.

Although they profess a strong preference for egalitarianism, the Yewésseys practice some forms of hierarchy that would have been familiar to our grandparents and great-grandparents. For example, those who can decipher the sacred scriptures, or books, are given special honors. The Yewésseys also accord special deference to those who manage to hoard the largest quantities of inert metals, such as gold, and other trade objects. However, other aspects of their system might strike us as bizarre. Their more modern neighbors feel that as long as you speak the same language and have the same culture, you have rights to the land and to equal protection by the tribal chiefs. In fact, some of their enemy tribes long believed that no one should control more land, more trade objects, or more access to the tribal chieftaincies than others.

This tribe that I have begun to study discarded long ago the notion that any particular lineage should rule the whole tribe. The tribe has formulated a system whereby any male—from the poorest to the richest—can entertain the hope of becoming the Supreme Tribal Chieftain, as long as he can prove himself free of any kinship to the Southern moiety. Ironically, high achievement in their tribal initiatic academies does not seem to be a prerequisite for holding this office.

The reader will require a bit more background to understand the complexities of what might otherwise seem an irrational social arrangement. In fact, the Yewésseys have mobilized their sophisticated ideological system to derive the most effective solutions available for the complex problems inherent in their history. Most of the members of this tribe are descended from people who traveled across a great lake in massive wind- or fossil fuel-powered canoes (see map). Although they lacked the intelligence to prevent warfare, starvation, and epidemic in their homelands, they were expert canoe-builders.

These primitive migrants were highly diverse in appearance. Migration from just the far northern cor-

ner of the lake included the curly-haired, the straight-haired, and the bald; the long-nosed, the short-nosed, the wide-nosed and the aquiline; the tall, the short, and the in-between; the hirsute and the hairless; the swarthy, the sallow, the freckled, the ruddy, and the pallid; the thin-lipped and the thick-lipped; the green-eyed, the grey-eyed, the blue-eyed, the hazel-eyed, the black-eyed, and the brown; the brown-, red-, and yellow-haired. They looked quite different from one another. They even smelled different on account of their diverse tribal cuisines.

But over time, they were persuaded to think of only the people from the southern corner of the lake as looking different. In fact, however, the Southerners had come from the most genetically and phenotypically diverse region on the planet. So they did not look much like one another, except for the greater density of epithelial melanoblasts enjoyed by some of them. In fact, because of the frequency of illicit sex between the moieties, many of their descendants looked no different from the people who came from the far northern corner of the lake.

However, as we shall see, certain powerful people had a vested interest in making sure that only the people of the far southern corner would be regarded as different, or *diverse*, as in the native litany "We don't have enough diversity here!" You see, a few of the early migrants from the far northern corner had gained control over the Southerners' labor and over the new land. And they were so eager to keep control over the Southern moiety that they gave all the poor newcomers who could prove they had no Southern ancestors or sympathies a few extra privileges. That way, the poor Northerners would lend a hand in keeping the Southern moiety down.

The Northern moiety would hesitate with each new wave of migrants (who, over time, looked less and less like the original migrants from the far northern corner of the lake). The native-born members of the Northern moiety could not at first be sure that the newcomers would defer to the native-born Northerners and join in their cause. For example, one of the great Northern tribal priests and chieftains of the 18th century wrote of one group of newcomers:

Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of Aliens, who will ... Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our language or customs, any more than they can acquire our complexion?... [T]he number of purely [Northern] people in the world is proportionally very small....the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes are generally of what we call a swarthy complexion; as are the Germans, the Saxons only excepted... [The Saxons and] the En-

glish make up the principal body of [true Northerners] on the face of the earth.⁴

Each group of newcomers at first attracted contempt on account of their racial and cultural differences from the native Northerners. But, over time, the newcomers learned that they could deflect their frustrations and pass that contempt on to the Southern moiety. They could step up to the Yewéssey dream on the backs of the Southerners. Over time, each migrant group was more eager to join the Northern moiety. Mistreated in their homelands, they felt like aristocrats in their new home. They relished their new material opportunities and the enormous psychological benefit of learning to feel superior to the Southern moiety. Moreover, as the Northern moiety grew larger, the poor among them realized that their future prosperity depended on keeping the Southern moiety out of the competition for land and metal. So they became the most ferocious defenders of the bilateral moiety system.⁵ Even recent newcomers from the southern corner of the lake, the original homeland of the Southern moiety, have been known to embrace this system and pursue strategic benefits by loudly distinguishing themselves from native-born Southerners. Nonetheless, Northerners often find these Southern newcomers excellent sacrificial victims.

Every successive generation of migrants that the old Northern chiefs admitted to enhance the power of Northern moiety has, in turn, learned and added its own genius to the periodic tribal ritual of accusing, capturing, and sacrificing individuals of the Southern moiety. Within a few years after migration, the newcomers' child-rearing practices come to include teaching the young colorful poetic epithets for individuals of the Southern moiety, such as: *mulanyan*, *schwartz*, *moreno*, *prieto*, *mayate*, *molleto*, *jungle bunny*, *darkie*, *spade*, *Sambo*, *spear-chucker*, *Smokie*, *coon*, *bootblack*, and the especially poetic *You fuckin' niggah*.

As they reach adolescence, many members of the Northern moiety will choose to have sexual intercourse with members of the Southern moiety. But, when it comes time for them to undergo the tribal rites of consolidating trade goods and producing the offspring who will inherit them, they take care to verify that a potential partner has no ancestors of the Southern moiety. Otherwise, some fear, their children will be passed over for high positions in the tribal government and in the management of the tribe's inert metals. Others simply fear ritual pollution, ostracism and punishment by the tribal god until the end of their generation.

THE CULT OF FORGETTING

Ironically, most members of this tribe who are interviewed by anthropologists deny any knowledge of these

rules of ritual hierarchy, pollution, and sacrifice because they so patently contradict the publicly stated ideals of the tribe that every member of the tribe is a *brother* or *sister* and that all of them have equal opportunities. To confess knowledge of these rules would also be a confession that those who have triumphed in the race for tribal rank and privilege did so with more than a little help. And that would contradict the highly-honored myth of self-sufficiency in this tribal culture. It would also be a confession that the strong had bullied the weak. And the Yewésseys, who have, in their majority, come to call themselves *Christians*, never like to believe that of themselves.

Hence, when they are observed at putatively secret rituals of hierarchy and sacrifice or when disgruntled members of the tribe reveal them, tribesmen are trained to perform certain ritual gestures of surprise and incredulity, which, when performed correctly, induce a powerful amnesia and inner bliss. For example,

- (1) "[*Gasp*] I'm so surprised. Does that really happen? I never realized";
- (2) "You people are overly sensitive. Why would you take it that way? They outlawed moiety-ism a long time ago";
- (3) "There's no moiety-ism here; we just promoted Bob Smith!";
- or (4) "Don't play the moiety card; *people* won't take you seriously."

So the next time anthropologists inquire about the local rules of ritual hierarchy, purity, and sacrifice, natives of the northern moiety have generally forgotten. They also tend to forget that many members of their own Northern moiety also lack access to the tribe's stock of inert metals. However, it is not that they have forgotten these people's existence; it is that they have forgotten that poor Northerners are human beings at all.

Tribesmen casually describe them by the names of various types of garbage, or reduce them to the color of their sunburned necks, or ridicule them with reference to the long metal boxes in which many of them make their homes. Some of my informants have expressed the wish for a Northern-Moiety History Month to go along with its Southern-Moiety counterpart. Indeed, this anthropologist agrees. Both moieties should commemorate what a history of collusion in the bilateral moiety system has cost them, and what all Yewéssey tribespeople have gained when they tried to overcome that system.

However, I am not hopeful that they will ever succeed. No caste or bilateral moiety society in history, to my knowledge, has ever escaped this system once it has been adopted. Once tasted, the delicious feeling of

superiority to a visible, internal Other is an addiction with no cure. It is tremendously gratifying to the individual and stabilizing to a society. The Yewéssey bilateral moiety system is likely to outlast even the millennial Indian caste system. The unique genius of the Yewéssey system is that its underlying principles are invisible to most of its practitioners and are therefore unavailable for criticism and revision. They are shrouded in a cloud of forgetfulness.

SACRIFICE AMONG THE YEWÉSSEYS

It must be said, however, that the tribe has over time tried to become more true to its public ideals. But it has been difficult, especially for the males. Of late, the great Yewéssey Cult of Forgetting has undergone a revitalization: the ritual sacrifices devoted to it have proliferated in recent years. Few anthropologists have noticed, however, that these rituals to restore the proper social order tend to fall into two distinct categories.

The first type is generally performed by rural adult males who are poor in inert metal and trade goods. These fascinating rituals tend to proceed as follows:

Several Northern males of this lower social status will assemble at night around vessels of fermented grain beverage and quaff deeply in order to induce amnesia. Like those who have forgotten their humanity, the males recite ritual incantations—known since their parents taught them in the cradle—to forget the humanity of their victims. Under the influence of the fermented-grain beverage, devotees become as one, chanting the incantations together. Then they lure a Southerner to a dark and quiet place, where they either light him on fire or chain him to the back of one of the tribal chariots and drag him at high velocity until most of his flesh comes off.

To vary the ritual, they might choose a feminine male of their own moiety. While uttering equally time-honored incantations, they might tie him to a fence post and beat him until his brains come out.

As they quaff more of the fermented grain beverage, they brag to their friends about how successfully the traditional social order has been restored.

There is a second, rather different type of restorative sacrificial ritual as well. This one is typically performed incorrectly, because it often results in the suicide of the ritual expert. This type is usually performed by urban juvenile males of the Northern moiety whose parents are wealthy in metal and trade goods.

Using their parents' sacred firesticks, they mow down their parents and/or dozens of fellow nov-

ices at the traditional initiatic academies, targeting Southerners and females of their own moiety in particular. Then, unfortunately, the ritual expert tends to commit suicide. The more successful variant of this restorative sacrifice is performed by adult Northern males, who prefer to mail bombs to people; to pick off a few dozen with a high-powered firestick from the roof of a tall hut; or blow up enormous temples full of hundreds of people.

There is, I should mention, a third type of sacrifice, which is preferred by male juveniles of the Southern moiety. They tend to shoot each other one-by-one. These sacrificial rituals, however, seem intended less to restore the traditional order than to enhance the Southern ritual expert's personal acquisition of inert metal, trade goods, and female sexual favors. However, the Southern male ritual experts have clearly mastered many of the lessons of the Yewéssey tribe's dominant ideology:

First, every tribesman should own a firestick and use it in an even fight;

Second, free enterprise is better than tribal government regulation;

And, the most highly prized lesson, a Southern male is better dead or in chains than alive and free to roam about.

Fortunately, the females of the Yewéssey tribe are not nearly as violent as the males, but they have problems of their own. The females of the Northern moiety are trained to be passive. Though they object vocally, they are trained to believe that they will not obtain a desirable mate unless they at least pretend to be passive, expertly deploying such gestures as the giggle and the head-toss. Indeed, when young or wealthy, they are relatively successful at obtaining mates. Those mates, however, sometimes sacrifice them. However, one sign of increasing self-determination among the females of the Northern moiety is that they have invented their own carthartic rituals, such as the drowning of their own children. After the sacrifice, however, the officiants of such domestic sacrifice tend to identify Southern males as the real agents of the sacrifice. In a fascinating way, this logic of agency transforms the worldwide phenomenon that anthropologists call *spirit possession*, whereby the actions of the present and visible human actor are attributed to an exogenous, and often symbolically opposite, invisible agent.

The females of the Southern moiety, on the other hand, are reputed to be self-determined and very strong, even stronger than the males. Many males of both moi-

eties fear them, but the females of the Northern moiety often admire them from a distance, relish the stories they tell about their triumph over adversity, and often seek their spiritual counsel. When women of the Southern moiety grow older, certain geniuses among them secure great power, even among the Northerners, by assuming a non-threatening *motherly* role and founding *scripture clubs*.

THE "FORGETTING" OF COMMONALITIES

By and large, however, the tribesmen of the Northern moiety despise the Southern moiety, and the tribesmen of the Southern moiety despise the Northern moiety. What is therefore surprising to many tribesmen is how much the two moieties have in common culturally. Despite a few infinitesimal differences that an outsider could hardly detect, they speak the same language, write in the same orthography, eat the same foods (they especially like Chinese food and ground animals served between sheets of baked wheat paste). They also worship the same god, wear the same clothes, and drive the same chariots. Indeed, the tribesmen of both moieties seem especially enamored with their tribal chariots. Identically, they express the most peculiar obsession with halitosis and sub-axillary odor. It is an open secret that they have many of the same ancestors, for even Supreme Tribal Chieftains (always of the Northern moiety) are known to have fathered children by mistresses of the Southern moiety.

And, regardless of moiety, members of the Yewéssey tribe share the same habit—remarked upon the world over—of thinking that everybody in the world should think and act just like them. Thus, this tribe has produced more missionaries, advertisers, and tribal warriors abroad than has any other tribe in the history of the world.

There is a further fascinating fact about relations between these two moieties. Despite the hatred they often feel for the Southern moiety, Northern missionaries, advertisers, tribal warriors and athletes, and the juveniles of every social rank spend a great deal of time imitating the Southern moiety. Approximately 10 years after learning the incantations used in forgetting the humanity of the Southern moiety, many Northern juveniles undergo a rite of passage, known by some as *the G-phase*. They spend a period of between three and ten years mimicking what the tribal propagandists have taught them are the typical language, sartorial style, and music of the Southern moiety. Northern and Southern male juveniles both tend to enjoy the music that most stigmatizes all the females of the tribe, describing them as female dogs and by a name resembling that of an agricultural implement.

THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF FORGETTING

During this same so-called "G-phase," Northern juveniles are also encouraged by their peers to engage in behaviors most uncharacteristic of the Southern males. They routinely consume large quantities of fermented grain beverage. They are praised by their friends when they accomplish the goal of regurgitating and falling into unconsciousness. One Northern informant tells me that the drinking ritual enhances the solidarity of the in-group, demonstrating that any given member is loved and respected, even when he behaves foolishly or commits infractions against the official laws of the tribe. The rite also dramatizes the reliability of friends, even when chemical influences might have been expected to cloud their rationality. Yet the rite also recasts a continuous theme in the tribal culture: Northern juveniles greatly enhance their prestige if they can convince their friends that they have forgotten all of the circumstances of the drinking ritual. *Forgetting* is an extremely important theme in the Northern subculture of the Yewéssey tribe.

Members of the Northern moiety base the legitimacy of their collective dominance on the fiction that every individual is self-made and that each generation makes its world anew, independently of events that preceded it. Hence, it is perfectly appropriate to forget the past. A particular native adage makes the tribes' own migrational history into a metaphor of Northerners' preferred view of history in general. The natives say, "The past is another country."

I should comment as well on some of the fascinating rites of passage among the Southern moiety. Juvenile males of the Southern moiety compete to demonstrate the greatest prowess at premarital sex. They appear to do so even more than the Northern males because Southerners have been browbeaten into believing that their only virtues lie in athletics and sexuality.

Indeed, most Northern males feel inferior to Southern males in these regards. This sense of inferiority prompts many Northern males to lash out with unbridled force when a Southern male challenges their authority or superiority in nonathletic and nonsexual pursuits. Northern males have developed superb rhetorical skills at creating suspicions about Southern males that lead to the latter's eventual sacrifice and/or loss of access to inert metals, trade goods, and female sexual services. Yet it is only recently that Southern men have been able to compete with Northern men even on the field of tribal sports.

I have recently conducted extensive interviews at two Yewéssey tribal initiatic academies and have sought to understand some of the similarities and differences between the local moiety systems they propagate. One of these academies is located inland, while the other is

near the lakeshore.

THE INLAND INITIATIC ACADEMY

As in many inland initiatic academies, the traditional tribal sport holds enormous importance at the one where I conducted my research. Not only the sport itself but the ritual practices surrounding it at this academy teach us a great deal about the Yewéssey moiety system and its symbolic logic. During the season of the year when most of the plants appear to die, the males of the tribe ritually demonstrate their defiance of death on the field of their bloody tribal sport. In this sport, they wrestle the inflated skin of a dead animal from one end of a field to the other, all the while trying to disable their opponents. They often succeed at fracturing each others' limbs and vertebrae, sometimes causing paralysis.

Because their wars are highly mechanized and sufficiently small to require the bodies of only the poorest tribesmen, it is through these mock-battles that most tribesmen demonstrate their bravery and compete for the attention of the most desirable females. In the inland initiatic academy that I researched, males who perform *less* well on the tribal athletic field participate vicariously by choosing, every year, the maiden who will represent the tribal ideal of female beauty and symbolize what the winners of the tribal sport can hope to possess as a reward for their mock victory on the field of death. Then they parade the *Official Nubile Maiden* up and down the village street to the cheers of the tribe.

Imagine how the tribe reacted, however, when one year the Northern juveniles lost control over the tribal election process, and a woman of the Southern moiety was chosen as the ideal representation of all female virtue and sexual desirability. Because of the contradiction between the public ideal of equality and the underlying principle of hierarchy in Yewéssey tribal culture, few Northerners who objected wanted to be known by name. So this anthropologist cannot be sure which Northerners chanted the tribal incantations from the crowd, which ones sent threats and curses through the tribe's long-distance voice boxes, or which ones attempted to run the poor Southern maiden down with their tribal chariots.

The anthropologist cannot say whether the tribal seers and criers failed on purpose or accidentally to broadcast news of her parade. The oversight might have been the outcome of diverse and contradictory intentions, but some of the seers and criers themselves tell me that incantations of forgetting—such as *Nigger*, *Chink*, and *Jew-girl*—are common in the hut where the seers and criers inscribe their weekly broadcasts on parchment. However, their collective forgetting did not create the problem.

Some speculate that the nonathletic boys who head

the juvenile brotherhoods of the Northern moiety would have been the most angry about the election of a Southerner as the Official Nubile Maiden. Perhaps, these informants speculate, their objection arose less from the fact that she was a Southerner than from the fact that she was not the mate of the Chief of Juvenile Brotherhoods, or of one of his supporters. The selection of the *Official Nubile Maiden* had apparently been one of the perquisites of his chieftaincy, which allowed him to reward the loyalty of his female mate or of his political deputies.

Some speculate that, even if objections to the Southern woman's election began among the Northerners' juvenile brotherhoods, it was probably the poor and uninitiated local villagers who took it from there. For those Northerners without access to inert metals and trade goods possess an even greater interest in the vicarious ownership of such symbols as the *Official Nubile Maiden* title, since those Northerners control so little else. For them, the election of a Southerner to that title further diminishes the symbolic value of the socially inferior Northern women whom they, as poor men, had been able to attract and marry in their youth.

For centuries, it was customary for such poor Northern men to rape women of the Southern moiety as a demonstration of these men's nominal participation in the power of the Northern moiety. Nonetheless, it was always important to participate in the public fiction that women of the Southern moiety were undesirable. To this day, the Northern merchants and criers invest great effort and reams of celluloid in convincing people that females of the Northern moiety are uniquely desirable. Some Southern males have also been convinced that a Northern bride or bed partner is a unique prestige object.

Consequently, several women of the Northern moiety have told me in interviews that Southern males treat them much more nicely than Northern males do. With so much emphasis placed on their sexual attractiveness, many Northern females have come to believe that they themselves are unworthy if male tribesmen do not find them irresistible. Therefore, they engage in sanguinary and sometimes suicidal rites to assure that they are skinny enough, that they have large enough mammaries, and that their noses sit at the *perfect* angle. Moreover, they spend nearly as much money on hair-care potions as Southern females do. For all their preoccupation with hair, such self-consciousness has rewarded Southern females so little that they tend to cultivate a high degree of emotional and financial self-reliance instead.

And, as for who chanted the incantations of forgetfulness at the Official Nubile Maiden's parade, or who sent the threats and curses through the long-distance voice box, or who tried to run her down in their tribal

chariots... I don't know. But some people say the whole matter has been blown out of proportion. They were surprised it happened, and they would just as well forget about it. It was a fluke, and the Southerners are just playing the "moiety card" again. Forgetting, however, does not seem to be a highly-valued form of conduct in the Southern subculture of Yewéssey society.

THE LAKESHORE INITIATIC ACADEMY

The shore of the lake is a site of constant arrivals from distant lands. For generations, the lakeshore has also been the place of sorting, where new arrivals—sometimes to their anger and dismay—are gradually assigned to one moiety or another. In recent years, the lakeshore initiatic academy that I researched has taken advantage of local demographics to intensify certain details of its initiation—engineering a four-year experience of initiatic *communitas*, where picture-perfect global "diversity" is temporarily substituted for the moiety system.

Communitas, of course, is anthropologist Victor Turner's term for phases of temporary equality in otherwise hierarchical societies.⁶ In these phases, the high and mighty pal around with the lowly, or the lowly are allowed temporarily to show disrespect toward their social superiors. In many societies, these phases occur annually, as in the case of *Holi* in India or *Carnaval* in Brazil. In other cases, *communitas* is a normal feature of rites of passage, in which the novice is temporarily removed from normal social life (and its hierarchies) in order to be remade, a new person, and then re-enter civilized society in a new and more elevated status.

The lakeshore tribal initiatic academy that I investigated employs a similar logic to its rites of passage—annually. This academy creates a space where, as a condition of their ascent into the most elite ranks of the Northern moiety, Northern juveniles are made to spend four years living, eating, and sleeping with Southerners. In fact, large numbers of newcomers and foreigners yet unidentified with one moiety or another are initiated simultaneously, so that the binary logic of the moiety system is further obfuscated in the service of *communitas*. Northerners, Southerners and newcomers—supposedly of all ilks and origins—are brought together in such a way that the principles of moiety organization seem to disappear. Even the ordeal by which novices are chosen for this academy reflects the objective to erase the moieties.

For example, the Southern novices are typically drawn from the small minority of Southerners who grew up on the Northern side of their native villages and who passed through the same pre-initiatic academies. They are usually the ones most wedded to the Northern subculture and/or the ones most imbued with Northern an-

cestry. Many others are the offspring of recent migrants from the southern corner of the lake, and, like generations of migrants from the northern corner, they have been encouraged by their parents to deride native-born Southerners and to avoid social contact with them at all costs. Nonetheless, and despite numerous official prohibitions against it, most of the Southern novices at the lakeshore initiatic academy (including the children of newcomers from the southern lake corner) crave the company of other Southerners, or at least relish some daily "down time," as they put it, away from the Northerners.

In the initiatic dramatization of *communitas*, *diversity* (rather than *moiety*) has become the watchword of this academy. Yet, given the non-Northerners' craving for the company of their own, such *diversity* must be appropriated and managed carefully. Otherwise, it might just get out of hand. The largest yearly gathering in the academy is called by a name that might be translated as *Diversity Harmonies*. It is the crescendo of the annual initiatic cycle, and the non-Northern novices spend months preparing for it. In it, representatives of each non-Northern group spend exactly one night donning costumes, serving foods, and dancing dances that represent them as absolutely different from the Northerners. When the performers finish, they are congratulated on the excellence of their *diversity*, and the initiating priests congratulate each other for exposing their Northern juveniles to it.

The next day, the non-Northern novices—having learned the most fundamental yet unspoken value of the Northern subculture—are expected to forget. They are expected to take off their costumes and re-integrate themselves into civilization by taking a meal with the Northerners. In fact, until the next *Diversity Harmonies* ritual, the non-Northerners (and especially the Southerners among them) are discouraged from ever eating with each other again. When they do so, they are suspected of making trouble and accused of offending the Great Spirit of the initiation.

Following the dictates of their Great Spirit, the fundamentalist priests also go to great lengths to prevent non-Northerners from living together or even having regular meeting places of their own.

The priests of the lakeshore initiatic academy represent the whole four-year procedure as an effort to dismantle the bilateral moiety system permanently for the benefit of the Yewéssey tribe at large. However, there are two enduring contradictions. First, the offspring of wealthy Northerners are unofficially allowed and even encouraged to form parallel secret initiatic societies of their own, where they can relax together, away from the view of Southerners and tribal newcomers. There they enjoy unlimited Northern-moiety solidarity, which they

expect to benefit them greatly when, as full-fledged initiates, they enter the adult world of tribal enterprise. They cement their solidarity through feasting and amnesiac reveling in their lavish, secret headquarters, which help to attract the choice females of the tribe, including the "diverse" females of their choosing.

This anthropologist cannot say whether, as the priests expect, this season of *communitas* will affect the adult marital and social choices of the Northern initiates. But I suspect that the large quantities of fermented-grain beverage available in the Northern secret societies—and all around the grounds of the initiatic academy—will help the young Northern novices to forget, and their parents will be relieved. Nor can I say whether the economic and political opportunities of Southern initiates are much affected. However, despite the renown of their initiatic credentials, numerous Southern initiates report encountering something they call *the glass thatch* in their adult pursuit of rank and power in the tribe.

The peculiarities of this lakeshore initiatic tradition have been designed chiefly through cooperation between the Southern priests and a particular clan of Northern priests. The integration of this particular clan into the Northern moiety is still resisted and resented by many Northern natives of the tribe. In fact, this clan was treated so badly by the ancestors of the other Northerners that good-willed people nowadays consider it rude to mention that they are anything but normal Northerners. This special clan of quasi-Northerners has intermittently allied with the Southerners to subvert the bilateral moiety system and, in this case, has endeavored to subvert that system at the most elite levels of the tribal aristocracy. However, it should be noted, this quasi-Northern group maintains its own parallel secret society on the grounds of the academy. Like the secret societies of the core Northern moiety, however, this one is linked to the academy only unofficially.

The second major contradiction in this local initiatic tradition is that the *priests* of this initiatic academy still organize themselves according to bilateral moiety principles that are but thinly veiled. For example, at this initiatic academy, almost all the priests of the Southern moiety occupy the same hut. Moreover, most of the Southern priests at this initiatic academy are married to Northern women. These marriages surprise most outsiders (accustomed as they are to the prohibition on moiety intermarriage in the wider society). Among insiders, the discussion of these marriages remains a "hidden transcript."⁷ That is, in a manner perfectly diagnostic of the character of the local hierarchy, natives normally refrain from discussing the phenomenon publicly or across moiety lines.

Yet, because of the anthropologist's neutrality, in-

formants of both moieties volunteered extensive opinions to me. On the one hand, my Northern informants tend to regard such intermarriage as perfectly pleasing to the egalitarian Great Spirit of the initiation. With perfect consistency, nearly every Northern novice I talked with is also intensely aware that one or both parents would adamantly disapprove of his or her marrying a Southerner. My Southern informants, on the other hand, express either resignation or anger about priestly intermarriage. Many Southern female novices in particular regard these marriages as the foremost sign of these Southern priests' disloyalty to the Southern moiety and find their hypogamous character consistent with the time-honored devaluation of Southern women in Yewéssey society. (Indeed, it is taken for granted that Northern priests continue to observe the taboo against marrying Southern women). Though my Southern female informants tend to express distaste for the idea of marrying a Northern male, the chief subtext of their resentment is that, combined with the society-wide tradition of sacrificing male Southerners, this local tradition of moiety hypogamy is likely to leave many Southern women without any marital prospects at all.

Whomever they marry, Southern priests remain intensely aware that, if they run afoul of the priorities and interests of their Northern counterparts, they too can be accused and sacrificed. Hence, they become highly skilled at cultivating multiple constituencies, often deliberately creating ambiguities about where their interests, loyalties, and identities lie. And they create these ambiguities through all the means at their disposal—combining contradictory signs in their liturgy, their sacred inscriptions, their priestly dress, their accents, their marital choices, their priestly alliances, and so on.

Such management of contradiction opens up a fascinating space of subaltern agency for Southern priests. On the one hand, those who most aggressively denounce insubordinate priests of their own moiety endear themselves to the Northern moiety and sometimes thereby secure significant institutional powers. Thus, Southern priests discuss Southern colleagues who have fallen in the past with a certain bravado and sense of immunity, but they think long and hard before intervening to defend such a colleague while he is under attack. Southern male novices among my informants also note the Southern priests' unwillingness to defend them from assault and sacrifice. What a Southern priest can never do (at the cost of his personal and priestly survival) is forget the strategic and tenuous character of his success. For men of the Southern moiety who rise above their expected station have always been the most highly prized of sacrificial victims.

CONCLUSION

For anthropologists, the Yewéssey tribe has been a major case study in the mechanisms of social, or collective, forgetting. When people are proud and empowered by what they possess and control, they would rather forget that a strong wind was at their backs. But such forgetting is not simply a matter of preference. The present study suggests that rituals of forgetting are a highly efficient mechanism for the resolution of cultural contradiction. At a relatively small cost in human lives and with little harm to high-status members of the tribe, these rituals preserve the happiness of the majority and the integrity of a society that is always potentially divided against itself.

Whereas I have called this tribe the Yewésseys, some of their neighbors call them the *estadounidenses*. Their sister tribe at the far northern corner of the lake tends to call them "You Bloody Americans!" But the reader should not judge this tribe as harshly as its sister tribe does. The Yewésseys are just as human, just as wonderful, and just as flawed as you and I.

QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

How many students have read other studies of this tribe?

How would you like to live among the Yewésseys?

How do you think it would feel to be a woman of the Southern moiety?

How would it feel to be a man of the Northern moiety?

Professors might ask for a show of hands on the following questions:

Given the choice, how many students would like to be females of the Southern moiety?

Males of the Southern moiety?

Females of the Northern moiety?

Or males of the Northern moiety?

Students should note that being a male of the Northern moiety is not as easy as it looks. One would face numerous and difficult moral choices on a daily basis. Students should also know that this is the category of tribespeople most likely to commit suicide.

NOTES

1. Conrad Phillip Kottak, *Cultural Anthropology*, sixth edition (New York: McGraw-Hill), p.223.

2. See for example, Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1998).

3. Phoebe Ottenberg, "The Afikpo Ibo of Eastern Nigeria," in *Peoples of Africa*, abridged, James Lowell Gibb ed. (New York, Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Win-

ston, 1978[1965]), p.20.

4. Benjamin Franklin, "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c." (originally 1751), *The Magazine of History with Notes and Queries*, Vol. XVI, Extra nos. 61-64 (1918), (Tarrytown, NY: William Abbatt) p. 224.

5. See also T. Morrison's feature on this unusual tribe in *Time Magazine* (special fall issue, 1993), p.57.

6. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969)

7. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

8. As their name for themselves is also claimed by numerous other tribes, the Yewésseys have attracted an ever-expanding series of nicknames, such as *yánquis*, *gringos*, the Great Satan, and the *Nacirema* (see also Horace Miner, *Body Ritual among the Nacirema*, *American Anthropologist* 58:503-507).