"Hungry People have Hungry Ghosts": Mythic history, cosmology and violence.
Religion and Violence Lecture Series
October 31.02

The complex reciprocal relations between religion and violence are surely the topic of the
day, and, it seems, will remain so for some time to come. Here I want to explore how
some people who have experienced violence have dealt with it. That violence may have
had its basis in religion, or was rationalized by religious differences. On the other hand,
the response to violence may have been a religious one, and then again, this response
may have been a violent one. And so the cycle goes on. In people's various responses to
violence we may be able to detect a number of factors.

My title is taken, with slight modification, from the work of the Indian
psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar (1982), writing about the Oraon, a Hill people of Southern
India. It says that people form their image of the world from their experience, that the
spirits that populate that world are motivated much as the people themselves are. If the
people are hungry, they will see their spirits as resembling them in this as in other
respects. Kakar adds that hungry people must fight against the "demons of greed."
Hungry people wish to protect themselves against future hunger. If people tend to project
their own motivations on others, spirits as well as humans, how, we may then ask, do
people react to violence, actual or perceived, whether or not that violence is religiously
motivated?

Traditionally, anthropologists look to the ways of other people, often to see how
their practice sheds light on our own. So let us start by looking at some examples and see
what we may learn from them about the topic that interests us, the relationship between
religion and violence.

I shall not attempt to define "religion" here, but however we define it, I want to note that reference to "gods," "spirits," and "myths" are relevant to it.

And what do I mean by "mythic history," the second element in my title? Perhaps that will become clearer if I start by telling some stories. Here is one:

In his 1992 book, *The Nervous System*, the anthropologist Michael Taussig (pp. 37-52) tells of visiting Machu Picchu with an Indian medicine man from Columbia. Though Taussig knew the story of the re-discovery, in 1911, of this monumental ancient Inca city in the Peruvian highlands, and had seen pictures of it, he was impressed by what he saw. The Indian was not. He had seen it all before he said, when he had taken the hallucinogen yagé (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), as part of his practice as a healer. That is when the spirits had shown it to him. But how did they move these enormous stones, Taussig wanted to know. The Spanish did it, the old man explained, with whips, forcing the Indians to carry the stones. "That," he said, "is exactly what the Spanish did to my father-in-law." The Spanish here are Capuchin Fathers, missionaries in his community. The "old man," writes Taussig, "has collapsed three centuries...into a flashing instant of time..."

For him, what matters is the fact that being an Indian still means being oppressed by the Spanish. Note that the past is brought into the present and made politically and morally relevant; it thereby functions as a form of resistance to violence and domination. Though it does not take the form of a full narrative, this is one example of mythic history, indeed one that we may take as prototypical of the genre.

Mythic history may be contrasted with what we might call manipulated history. It operates today in the ancient Inca capital of Cuzco, not far from Machu Picchu. Helaine
Silverman (2002) has recently described this process by which the city is presented both to the local people and to tourists. Its name now spelled Qosqo, the city is the subject of historical reconstructions and presentations, stimulating local pride in Indianness. The slogan of this campaign is: rediscover the old Qosqo to create the new. A salient feature of the past, however, is elided: The Inca, like the Spaniards after them, were conquerors; the local populations were not Incas.

The Incas' own origin myth was told by Garcilaso de La Vega in his Royal Commentaries. Garcilaso was the son of a Spanish nobleman and an Inca princess and he told the story as he heard it from the men of his mother's family. According to this account, Manco Capac, the first Inca and his sister-wife were the children of the Sun and the Moon. They gathered local people, --Garcilaso refers to them as "savages"--to teach them various arts and practices. It is on the basis of this subject population they built their state and empire.

When anthropologists speak of myths, they do not mean untruths, as in everyday talk, as in: "It's just an urban myth that there are alligators in NYC tunnels...." To the contrary, to the anthropologist and the folklorist, myths are sacred texts, usually but not always a corpus of narratives. I'll have more to say about this point in a moment, with reference to Haiti, where such corpus of narratives is strikingly absent. For anthropologists, in spite of varying definitions, myths deal with the sacred and with past events. Reviewing a study of Mexican myths by Michel Graulich (1987), Marion and Heyden write:" Mesoamerican cosmovision is a kind of mnemotechnics used to explain and translate history--to make it coherent." In his own summing up, Graulich (1997:277) notes: "history was disorderly and the Indians were horrified by disorder." In other
My title is taken, with slight modification, from the Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar (1982), writing about the Oraon, a Hill people who live in the South of India. It says that people form their image of the world from their experience, that the spirits that populate that world are motivated much as the people themselves are. And he adds that hungry people must fight against the "demons of greed." Hungry people wish to protect themselves against future hunger. How, we may then ask do people react to violence, whether or not that violence is religiously motivated?

And what is "mythic history", the second element in my title?? Perhaps that will become clearer if I start by telling some stories. Here is one, from the writings of the anthropologist Michael Taussig (1992: 37-52):

*When anthropologists speak of myths, they mean...* These are not necessarily in narrative form. In Haiti, for example people who are collectively the objects of violence may respond with violence. They may justify this violence in religious terms. When they are powerless in the face of violence, they may project their experience to the cosmic level. The relation, then is a reciprocal one: religion to violence-or violence to religion--either as a justification for further violence or to a mystical understanding of the violence or, indeed, both.

Mythic history projects the group's human, this-world experience to the cosmic level. It is no accident that Jewish mysticism, as in the creation of the Kabbalah,
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words, the myths turned history not only into a sacred account but also into a coherent one. From historical events and from bits of earlier stories, they created what I am here calling "mythic history," an account that satisfied their need for order and coherence, denying the disorder of actual history.

It is evident that humans in general, and not only the ancient Mesoamericans, seek order and predictability, even if they have to impose it on a disorderly world of human affairs. In our attempt to understand our experience, we tell ourselves and each other stories, stories that fit into our cognitive structures, even at the risk of modifying these structures when necessary. I refer here to our broad world view, our cosmological understanding, to what my teacher, A. I. Hallowell called our "culturally constituted behavioral environment." People in different cultures, with different languages, live in distinct behavioral environments. Their behavior can be understood if we know how they see the world. What beings and forces are at work? What was the past like? What can we expect of the future? Stories we tell each other and ourselves help us cope with experiences, give them meaning. The remarks of Taussig's Indian companion exemplify this in a direct and unassuming way.

Let me turn to another example. What mythic history do we find, for example, in Haiti? Haiti's bicentennial as an independent republic is coming up in 2004. Haiti was the second country in the Americas to gain its independence from a colonial power. It is the only one which is the product of a successful slave revolt. Its history shows that it has paid dearly for that success—-in isolation, scorn, exploitation. Haiti is known in this country as the poorest in the western Hemisphere and one of the poorest in the world. Speaking of scorn and prejudice, you may remember that at the beginning of the AIDS
epidemic, being a Haitian was considered a risk factor by American authorities. Haiti is also known for vodou, its Afro-Catholic folk religion, about which a substantial amount of sensationalism and nonsense has been spread. Vodou with its worldview is shared by the great majority of Haitians, including many now living in the United States and elsewhere. It was initially built during the period of slavery when people from different parts of Western and Central Africa were brought to what was then, in the 18th century, France's most prosperous colony. The Catholic Church, the official and only religion of France, "converted" them, without, however, much instruction. Haitians say they were "baptized standing up" (batise debou). Thus there arose an amalgam of beliefs and practices of several African peoples, and these were further linked to those of Catholicism. This phenomenon of multiple syncretisms also took place in other parts of Catholic America and gave rise to such religions as santeria in Cuba and candomblé, macumba, xângo, umbanda and others in Brazil.

What mythic history is there in Haiti? There is little in the form of a corpus of narratives, but there is a lot in ritual practice and the cosmology associated with it. Relations with the lwa, the spirits of vodou, are direct, personal, and intimate. Their tastes, characteristics and behaviors are known. They communicate with the faithful through possession, through dreams and in other ways. Men of power of the past, such as the dictator Francois Duvalier, known as Papa Doc--he was a physician--have been turned into lwa. But so have selected ancestors of individual families and these are then known as lwa canonisé. A person possessed by a spirit is known as that spirit's "horse." In Haiti spirits "mount" their "horses," as they do among the Yoruba and other West African people. It may well be that this image of horse and rider reflects the fear and awe inspired
Like the Oraon, Haitians are hungry --quite literally--and so are their lwa. They demand sacrifices and it is said that some lwa can be made to work at the bidding of those who feed them by the manner in which they are fed. When they kill people--through illness--it is said that they "eat" them. On the other hand, the spirits are realistic and will temporarily be satisfied with a token ritual performance while waiting for the fulfillment of a promised feast or initiation.

The Haitian revolution was a violent response to oppression by the French slave regime. According to tradition, the revolt began with a vodou ceremony, under the leadership of a vodou priest by the name of Boukman. Here people were united in a secret pact, support by a belief in their invincibility on the basis of a traditional Dahomean blood pact.

In more recent times, religion and politics have been intimately mixed and have contributed to the country's historic political instability. Duvalier was widely rumored to be a practitioner of vodou, though he claimed his interest was only ethnographic. In any event, he used his connections with vodou practitioners to consolidate his political power recruiting many of them into his American-trained paramilitary force, the feared tontons macoute. When the Duvalier regime fell, the followers of the popular new president Aristide, a Catholic priest, attacked them in a movement known as "uprooting"--dechoucaj. Religious violence as a response to religious violence. Or rather, in both cases, political violence dressed up as religious violence. Or perhaps the religious and the political cannot be fully separated.

On a more intimate level, it should be noted that people's everyday behavior is based on their perception of the world and therefore, among vodouisant, on their relation
with the spirits. The spirits get into people's dreams and into their art, as well as into politics, and this is where mythic history grows and develops to be told and retold and played out.

Writing of the mythology of the Thompson River Indians more than a hundred years ago, Franz Boas (1898:18) noted: "It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again and that new worlds were built up from fragments." Here is a Haitian example, a story that was told to me by a young woman in Haiti more than 50 years ago. To illustrate the point that you never know who anyone really is, this is what she said:

"Like beggars you don't know. Once a beggar had gone to ask for some water and one woman chased him away and the second gave him a dirty pot. But the third gave him a clean tray and a clean glass. The beggar was really bon dieu (the good Lord). So he told the woman there would be a great disaster and she should go away and not even turn around. And then there was a great disaster. You have heard about it, haven't you. That was in Dominicanie. But the woman turned around and so she turned into a rock."

The raw materials for this account are easily recognized by us, the outsiders, though clearly not by the teller of this tale: The Christian injunction to do unto the least, a (then) recent historical event--the 1936 hurricane that destroyed the capital of Haiti's neighbor, the Dominican Republic-- and, finally, the Biblical story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot's wife. A moral injunction and the ambiguity of strangers are seamlessly combined in this informal, conversational anecdote. As much of mythic history, it is a story with a message. As with Taussig's story, the past is made present and morally and perhaps politically relevant. It says, among other things that it is important to
be careful with strangers, to take one's precautions to be obedient at the risk of serious
punishment. In this account the unknown beggar is one who can reward you. In other
interactions the unknown person or animal can be dangerous and it is best to be prudent,
to show a smiling face. Throughout the Caribbean region, it has been claimed, there is a
general ethos of suspicious. The world is a dangerous place. Although there has been
much open, physical violence in recent years--and most of it not motivated by religion--
in long stretches of Haitian history violence was of a covert nature: gossip, suspicions of
witchcraft, of dangerous alien bought spirits, secret societies and forth. Much of this
cannot be separated from the general system of belief and understanding of the nature of
the world and of the beings that inhabit it.

This is only one specific example that illustrates a larger matter: human beings
seek understanding and coherence in their attempts to cope with the realities of the world
in which they live. We may draw our illustrations from all part of the world and all
historic periods.

It may be true that history, as the saying goes, is written by the winners, but losers
too tell stories, and they do so to make the events meaningful, to cope with them and with
their consequences. At the same time the image of the world, the cosmology they
construct resembles their everyday world in significant ways. Taussig's Indian says on the
one hand, yagé gives me access to the spirits and the spirits tell me all I need to know.
With their help I am not powerless. On the other hand, he is quite matter of fact about
social reality: as Indians we are oppressed and have been oppressed, there is no surprise
in that.
Haitians live in a world of uncertainty, one of hierarchy and struggle over limited resources. This world of human relations is seen in terms of a cosmological picture. Help can come from the spirits yet you can never be sure with whom or with what you are dealing. Overt violence is mostly likely manipulated by élites.

People who are collectively the objects of violence may respond with violence. They may justify this violence in religion religious terms. Public violence is justified by grievances, actual or presumed, but strongly felt, previous violence. Mythic history projects actual events into the religious domain.

What about ourselves, in this age of foreign and domestic terrorism, as well as in our memories of past terrors, wars and genocides? Americans have often been portrayed as essentially optimistic and forward looking, living in the present and the future rather than in the past. Perhaps this is reflected in a suppression and erasure of unpleasantness from the past. While 9/11 was and is full of horror, we hear a great deal about heroism, self sacrifice, generosity. We do not wish to think about confusion, disorganization, pain and suffering. Indeed, images of pain and suffering have been suppressed as in Rockefeller center's statue of a falling woman, by sculptor Eric Fischl, intended to commemorate those who jumped or fell to their deaths from the World Trade Center. It was removed in response to comments such as: "it's not art. It's very disruptive when you see it."(AP).

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Rockefeller Center's statue of a falling woman, by sculptor Eric Fischl. It was intended to commemorate those who jumped or fell to their deaths from the World Trade Center. The statue was quickly removed in response to comments such as: "it's not art. It's very disruptive when you see it." (AP). "...a visual atrocity" said one commentator, a "grotesquerie." In this view, art is something to make you feel good. Surely the tradition of Christian art, with its often gruesome renditions of crucifixion and martyrdoms was and is "disruptive when you see it." And it was meant to be, to give the viewer pause. Much has been made of the "good" war," in Terkel's ironic title. The realistic Normandy beach scenes of Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan have been shocking because the reality of the Allied landing in Normandy has been rarely acknowledged. Even Spielberg's Holocaust film Schindler's List is ultimately hopeful and upbeat, and thus a denial of what happened.

My final example ties in with Matt's discussion of millenarian movements. I refer to current talk of Armageddon and the Book of Revelations. The author of this highly symbolic and coded book draws on the past to predict the future, to give his readers, and more likely hearers, confidence in harsh times, to castigate the wicked. For his authority he peppers his text with multiple biblical references that he expects his audience to recognize. He speaks of a final battle in a place known for earlier battles: Armageddon, har maged, Mt. Megiddo in Northern Israel. The final battle will pit the major powers of the earth against each other and end in their destruction. Only the faithful will be saved. What a wonderful fantasy for beleaguered people who do not have the means to destroy the powerful themselves! There will be the 2nd Coming of Christ and his peaceful reign
for a thousand years. You know the story. In the 21st century this apocalyptic vision provides the ground for American evangelical Christians in their support of the current government of the State of Israel. Again, the past is brought to bear on the present, on political action in the present. Where is the motivational source in this mythical history that looks to the future as well as the past? What is its appeal to these Americans? It may well lie in the deep resentment present in the White South, a resentment rooted in the Civil War and compensated for in the conviction that those who were defeated are virtuous and will be rewarded in the future. When leaders of this movement tell us that the attack on the WTC was divine punishment for America's sinfulness, what image of the divine is implied?

When people are powerless in the face of violence, they may project their experience to the cosmic level. Yet such fantasies may become the basis for violent action, either direct violence or mediated through political means. The relation, then is a reciprocal one: religion to violence-or violence to religion--either as a justification for further violence or to a mystical understanding of the violence or, indeed, both. And yet, a closer look at these examples suggests something different: In none of them does religion cause violence. Rather, like other ideologies, religion may both encourage and rationalize violence, but the cause lies elsewhere: in people’s motivational structures and in the institutions of their societies. There is frustration and anger on the one hand and scapegoating and the mobilization of energies on the other. When we see collective violence must we not ask: cui bono--for whose benefit?
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NOTE
"mythic history" appears in the title of a book review by Marion and Heyden(1990), but
not in its text. The note (p.220) that" Mexican cosmovision is a kind of mnemotechnics
used to explain and translate history--to make it coherent." The book's author, M.
Graulich, uses a Levi-Straussian structuralist approach to the study of Mexican myths. He
sums up his study by noting"...history was disorderly, and the Indians were horrified by
disorder. Paul Kirchoff, the historian, writes: 'Ancient Mexico was a world as organized
as could be where everything and everyone had their place.'
M&H review G's original ULB dissertation in French. My quotes are from abbreviated,
English translation from the Spanish.