4 Rethinking Superstition: Pagan Ritual in Lafitau's Moeurs des sauvages

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In the eighteenth century, several major works on the world’s religious ceremonies were published. These encyclopedic projects catalogue, describe, and provide visual illustrations of the diversity of worship around the globe, including the increasingly baggy category of paganism. The source material for what they called “idolatry” or “pagan superstitions” was recycled, for the most part, from travellers’ and missionaries’ accounts. In this same period, many French, Dutch, and British writers inquired into paganism’s origins, essence, and the history of its forms, and they too combed this corpus of travel and missionary accounts for information. Comparison was the dominant method in both encyclopedias and treatises: the polytheists of the Americas, Africa, and Asia were compared to one another, and to the pagan cults of antiquity. This early foray into comparative religious customs has been seen as a watershed in the understanding of religion. Guy Stroumsa has argued that eighteenth-century works about rituals contributed to a “genuine revolution in knowledge and attitudes” about religion. Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt have made a similar point about the Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde – a monumental work compiled by Jean-Frédéric Bernard and illustrated by Bernard Picart – claiming that it fostered secularist toleration in part by “consistently shin[ing] the most favorable light possible on idolatrous customs and practices.”

Most historians agree that a broader transformation from blinkered Christian dogmatism to secular relativism regarding the world’s religions took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They attribute this paradigm shift to several factors including this dissemination of “factual information” about the “vast and murky area” of indigenous
polytheistic religions, as well as to the emergence of scholarly methods of scrutinizing classical, biblical, and doctrinal authorities, and the rise of criticism of religious institutions. One potential problem with these arguments as they pertain to paganism is their proleptic differentiation of the European’s observational mode from pagans’ participatory experience. If pagan ritual is seen as a case of the viewer versus the viewed, it presumes a certain objectifying distance already associated with rational and scientific inquiry. Yet how does a pagan rite become observable in the first place? Pagan ceremonies, which are necessarily fleeting and yet eminently repeatable performances of subjective and communal spirituality, may have visible and audible aspects, but something remains unobservable in such acts. Before submitting the early eighteenth-century’s view of pagan ceremonies to a familiar narrative in which rituals become yet another province of modern knowledge production, we might look more carefully at the period’s suppositions about how pagan ceremonies did – and did not – become objects of knowledge.

As Jean-Frédéric Bernard explains in *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, rituals were not entirely a function of the empirical gaze. His prefatory dissertation on religious cult begins: “La plus grande partie des hommes ignoreroit qu’il y a un dieu, si le culte qu’on doit lui rendre n’étoit accompagné de quelques marques extérieures. Moins on a connu l’Être suprême et plus ces marques ont été bizarres et extravagantes.” (Most of mankind would have no knowledge of a God, were not that worship that is due him accompanied by some external signs. The less the supreme being has been known, the more these signs have been whimsical and extravagant.) Bernard treats religious rituals as visible and audible expressions of our knowledge of the supreme being, though he states it negatively: without such external signs, the supreme being would not be known. According to this view, which Bernard shared with many of his contemporaries, the human mind is innately endowed with the capacity to know the deity, and worship is the privileged medium of inherent human religiosity. Nonetheless, Bernard derogates the immodesty of pagan ceremonies, listing rites such as human sacrifice – “barbare et cruelle” – among other obtrusions of rational worship, and asserting that “peu de gens ont été capables de s’élever jusqu’à la Divinité” (few have been able to raise their minds up to the divinity). This statement seems to challenge the view that Bernard, a Protestant, is a tolerant secularist. Yet the relation between the trappings of ritual and the natural knowledge of
“the divinity” is significant precisely because he neither judges pagans based on Christian beliefs alone, nor does he secularize ritual. Protestants and Catholics alike deprecated the excesses of pagan rites on the assumption that all people tend to become dependent on outward signs of worship, but Bernard does not equate ceremonial whimsy with a denial of divinity in pagan cults. Fetishes and idols, which also attract an abundance of attention in this period, appeared to Westerners as false embodiments of the deity and were often condemned in theory. In practice, material objects deemed to be fetishes or idols were sometimes destroyed to carry out the condemnation, but were also seen as curiosities and taken from their original sites by traders and collectors, thus undergoing a complex process of desacralization. Pagan ceremonies, however, were not dismissed as counterfeits of (the monotheist) God, and for many, they were the natural embodiments of the unseen divinity.

Thus, rites of all kinds were necessarily available to empirical observation and ethnographic description as externalized acts, and yet, as Bernard reveals, rituals also conveyed imperceptible being. The concept of natural religion, which deemed all humanity capable of knowledge of the supreme deity, appeared to reconcile monotheism with paganism, at least for a time, but my emphasis here is not on Europeans’ mediations of religious difference. Rather, the question relates to ritual’s suturing of imperceptible being to observable acts, and how this bears on knowledge production in the early Enlightenment. To pursue this question, I turn to a single-authored work that deals extensively with pagan religious customs from a comparative perspective, published just one year after Bernard and Picart’s grand project began to appear in print. Joseph-François Lafitau’s *Moeurs des sauvages américains, comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps* (*Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*) deals with several aspects of native culture, but the book’s predominant concern is with pagan rites in the Americas and in antiquity. The 350-page chapter on religion occupies most of the first of its two volumes, whereas a more conventional ethnographic chapter on the physical and mental qualities of native peoples – “caractère des sauvages” – is only a few pages long. Lafitau continually returns to religious rituals in subsequent chapters on native customs, including government, medicine, as well as death, burial, and mourning. In the introduction he writes: “La Religion influait en tout” (Religion played a part in everything), and then again at the conclusion of the chapter on religion, he states: “La
Religion influait autrefois dans tout ce que faisaient les hommes” (Formerly, the influence of religion was important in everything men did).\textsuperscript{10} Lafitau was a French Jesuit missionary who spent five years at a mission in New France and has long been seen as a forerunner of modern anthropology. His firsthand contact with indigenous groups recorded in the \textit{Moeurs} appears to be among the first scientifically based, observational works of ethnography.\textsuperscript{11} In his early history of French anthropology, Arnold Van Gennep, author of the classic \textit{Rites of Passage}, places Lafitau in the company of Enlightenment writers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and d’Alembert, but signals Lafitau’s “connaissance étendue et précise” (extensive and precise knowledge) of Native Americans.\textsuperscript{12} Ethnography has become the standard framework in which to read the \textit{Moeurs}. Yet, as Mary Baine Campbell has written, Lafitau also seems to yearn for a “less disenchanted world.”\textsuperscript{13} Campbell does not account for this conjunction, nor does Michel de Certeau, whose persuasive exegesis of the \textit{Moeurs}' frontispiece supposes a division of labour between the powerful, emergent discourse of ethnography and Lafitau’s “mysterious vision.”\textsuperscript{14} Other scholars have explored Lafitau’s Jesuit background in its historical context, but a more developed discussion of what William Fenton calls “the troublesome morass of ‘Religion’” in the \textit{Moeurs} is lacking.\textsuperscript{15} In part, the difficulty is that Lafitau’s comparative project challenges clear distinctions between the two domains of empirical ethnography and religiosity. The \textit{Moeurs} contains descriptions of pagan rites, but the empirical or scientific value of the descriptions is undermined by Lafitau’s unrelenting analogies between pagans of antiquity and North American indigenous peoples. These comparisons between different religious cultures, which are oriented entirely to resemblance, were called “conformities” in the early modern era, and can be distinguished from the modern comparison in that the latter draws out both similarity and difference. I argue that the conformity has a rhetorical and explanatory function, but in the \textit{Moeurs} it is also a model for apprehending the unobservable nature of pagan ritual.

The conformity’s emphasis on resemblances deters ethnographic fact-making and its secularizing effects. It is not, however, merely a misperception or concealment of differences, attributable to the lens of Western, Christian ideology, or as a step towards the Enlightenment’s theory of primitive mentality. To demonstrate that the conformity is an alternative view of pagan ritual, I contextualize it in early modern comparativism, and then analyse the most developed of the \textit{Moeurs}' conformities: that the ancient rites of Bacchus stand for all pagan cult – in
antiquity and among all indigenous peoples. The Bacchic rites, which are recuperated by Lafitau from their associations with malignant enthusiasm, are obscure, formless rituals. At their core is the "frenzy," which is not a set of ritual regulations to perform, but a sensory and meta-sensory experience that mingles human and nonhuman being. The conformity apprehends ritual by approximating this ontological perplexity. Its significance in the early eighteenth century is that rather than constitute paganism as a culture or religion, the conformity elicits a kind of counter-productive knowing.

Comparing Comparisons

Jacques Revel has argued recently that the comparison had multiple purposes rather than a single, stable use in the early eighteenth century. He notes that despite the scientific aims of projects like Bernard and Picart’s, comparisons were often allegorical, or used for argumentative purposes. Revel usefully establishes and contextualizes certain aspects of comparison, but his brief study is limited to three examples. A survey of the larger spectrum of comparisons in the period reveals a correlation between the purpose of comparing and the relative investment of the comparatist in similarity or difference. Thus, the “conformity,” which lies at one end of this comparison spectrum, focused exclusively on resemblances and often served a specific argumentative purpose. It is found in the works of several French Protestants, including Jonas Porée and Pierre Mussard, as well as British Protestants like Conyers Middleton, who contended that the ostensible similarities between ancient heathen rites and those of the Roman Catholic Church were proof of the impurity of the Church’s historical foundations. Noël Alexandre’s *Conformité des cérémonies chinoises avec l’idolâtrie grecque et romaine* (Conformity of Chinese ceremonies with Greek and Roman Idolatry) uses the conformity in an East–West comparison, and the goal here is also to defend a position in a theological controversy. In this case, Alexandre uses conformities to critique Jesuit missionary practices in China. La Créquinière’s *Conformité des coûtures des Indian orientaux, avec celles des Juifs et autres peuples de l’antiquité* (The Agreement of the Customs of the East Indians with those of the Jews and Other Ancient People), which catalogues conformities between Hindu and Jewish customs, represents a shift in the aims of the device. His stated purpose is not polemical, but a kind of reverse illumination of ethnography for antiquarianism: “La connaissance des Coûtures Indiennes prises en
elles-mêmes n’était d’aucune utilité; que je ne croyois devoir m’en servir que pour justifier ce que l’on nous rapporte des Anciens, & pour l’éclaircir lorsque l’occasion s’en présenteroit; qu’en un mot, l’Antiquité était mon unique but” (The knowledge of the customs of the Indians is no ways useful in itself, that I thought myself obliged to make use of it, only to justify what is told us of the ancients and to explain it whenever an occasion offers, and in a word that antiquity was my only aim). 19

The conformity, which was elastic enough to be deployed for theological debates, antiquarianism, and ethnography, also had a place in natural science, where displays of “objects of the most disparate provenances … [were] arranged to maximize resemblance rather than diversity.” 20 Lorraine Daston has traced a shift from this resemblance orientation in seventeenth-century displays to early eighteenth-century scientific practices, which “arrange or show the plenitude of nature as a continuous series,” underwritten by a new commitment to the universalization of nature. 21 The conformity was still a predominant method of comparison around 1700, and despite the variety of agendas it served, it consistently focused on resemblances and continuities rather than differences. More important, the conformities are presumed by their authors to be indubitable and immediately evident rather than a labour of judgment.

The early eighteenth-century comparison was transformed, however, by Linnaeus’s use of “collation” in plant morphology, which represents, for the purposes of situating the Mœurs’ comparisons, the empirical end of the spectrum of comparisons. The collation designates a comparison that assesses both similarity and difference, which made it possible to identify the general attributes of individuals that inform the species, and those of the species that inform the genera. 22 Some historians of science have remarked that Linnaeus’s use of the type specimen, which combines features of particular plants rather than representing a unique individual specimen, reveals an idealizing tendency in his otherwise scientific pursuit. 23 The type specimen was used, however, for purposes of illustration, not categorization. In terms of comparisons, the salient point is that the collation was a process of induction from observed traits of particulars. In this way, the collation is the closest relative of the modern scientific comparison, and it is worth noting that the modern anthropological study of religious rituals follows the collation in large part. The anthropologist often acts as a participant-observer of a rite or receives reports given by participants. Detailed descriptions of the rite then help classify it according to its function in the culture’s symbolic
system and as one of its structural mechanisms. Or, the classification proceeds by generating a typology of rites across cultures.24

It has been difficult to characterize Lafitau’s comparative project and to unpack his conformities because he explicitly subscribes to several agendas at once. He states in the introduction that his work is based on observations he and his missionary colleagues gathered in the field, which suggests proto-scientific aims.25 Lafitau also seems to follow La Créquinière’s use of the conformity, explaining that information on Native peoples was used to verify ancient sources: “J’avoue que si les Auteurs anciens m’ont donné des lumières pour appuyer quelques conjectures heureuses touchant les Sauvages, les Coûtumes des Sauvages m’ont donné des lumières pour entendre plus facilement, et pour expliquer plusieurs choses qui sont dans les Auteurs anciens” (I confess that, if the ancient authors have given me information on which to base happy conjectures about the Indians, the customs of the Indians have given me information on the basis of which I can understand more easily and explain more readily many things in the ancient authors).26 More than two hundred sources are cited in the Moeurs, and Lafitau often includes a commentary on their documentary value, suggesting a rationalist approach. Lafitau also emphasizes that his goal is not only to compare indigenous groups and the ancients, but to rediscover a distant prehistory. Here, he engages in pure speculation: “J’ai cherché dans ces pratiques et dans ces coutumes des vestiges de l’antiquité la plus reculée” (I have sought in these practices and customs vestiges of the most remote antiquity) – the premiers temps of his title.27 Lafitau conjectured that “America was peopled a short time after the flood” by early Greeks, and this genealogy is visible in the conformities of their customs.28 His adherence to historical diffusionism is obliquely related to another conjecture about prehistory – that pagan cults retain traces of an originary belief in a supreme being – and again relies on conformities to make this point.29 The Moeurs appears to vacillate, then, between ethnography, antiquarian pursuits, and conjectural history as well as between scientific, rationalist, and speculative methods.30

A careful reading of Lafitau’s work reveals an inordinate amount of convoluted syntax, which would seem to merely manifest the confusion of the book’s aims as a whole. A closer look at certain rhetorical patterns, including the use of perplexing locutions, however, exhibits a turn away from the argumentative conformity, as well as from the scientific comparison. For example, in one of Lafitau’s earliest claims
about pagan ceremony, he asserts that the Americans have a religion that has

des rapports d’une si grande conformité avec celle des premiers temps, avec ce qu’on appelloit dans l’Antiquité les Orgyes de Bacchus et de la Mère des Dieux, les mystères d’Isis et d’Osiris, qu’on sent d’abord à cette resemblance que ce sont partout et les mêmes principes et le même fonds

[such great conformity with that of the first times in its manifestations and with what were called, in antiquity, the bacchanalian orgies and those of the Mother of the Gods and the mysteries of Isis and Osiris that one thinks at once by this resemblance that there are everywhere both the same principles and the same basic belief].

The reference to prehistorical “first times” turns the comparative dyad of native and ancient into a triangulated affair. Yet Lafitau’s use of the conjunction “and” is unclear: indigenous religions manifest a “great conformity with religion of the first times and with what were called in antiquity, the bacchanalian orgies.” Are there two sets of vestigial religious practices, the dead (ancients) and the living (indigenous), which both emanated from prehistory? Or is native paganism a manifestation of one ancient model? It is also unclear whether the religion of the first times signifies a philosophical fiction like the state of nature, or a historical practice that streams into recorded antiquity, or whether the first times may be a historical vanishing point, which can be retraced through indigenous practices, if only asymptotically.

As William Fenton and Elizabeth Moore explain, Lafitau’s *premiers temps* is probably taken from the French historian Bossuet, for whom the term designated the three millennia before Moses and the Flood, but Lafitau uses the notion in ways that are less clear and consistent. The comparison here between actual religious customs and an imaginary prehistorical religion is significant nonetheless because it implies that resemblances are the focal point, but that such similarities are not of observable particulars alone. This abdication of a purely evidentiary rationale is reinforced by Lafitau’s reference to orgies and mysteries – a particular group of ancient cultic practices in which the initiates were sworn to secrecy, and few records of their actual features exist. I will return to the bacchanalalian orgies in greater detail below, but in the context of Lafitau’s rhetoric, the point here is that the interposition of prehistory as a *tertium comparationis* refers to some realm outside of
historical record and observed fact. The final convolution of the passage is its illogical segue from the comparison to the conclusion that religious principles and beliefs are “everywhere the same.” The work of the conformity consists, then, in both presenting comparable particulars, but then withdrawing from particularity to obscurity and from thence to absolute indistinction where all religious principles are “the same.”

In a further abandonment of an evidentiary rationale, the conformities are presumed to be self-evident. The very statement of a similitude is, for Lafitau, a sufficient demonstration of it. For example, he writes that the Carib ritual of offerings of cassava and ouicou, placed “sur une espèce d’autel au fonds de leurs cabanes, où qu’ils mettent devant certains pieux qu’ils enfoncent en terre, sont les présents de Bacchus et Cérès, leur vin et leur pain qui sont la matière de leurs sacrifices” (on a kind of altar in the back of their huts or place[d] before appointed posts driven into the earth, are the presents of Bacchus and Ceres, their wine and bread which are the substance of their sacrifice). The Carib gifts of ouicou, a beer made of potato, cassava, and banana, and cassava, a root, simply “are” the gifts of Bacchus (wine), and Ceres (bread/grain). This conformity elides differences since the appositive “Bacchus and Ceres, their wine and bread,” seems to indicate that the gods’ names are not metaphors here: the similitude is not attended with the recognition of any material difference of wine from ouicou, and bread/grain from cassava. Other discursive symptoms of the conformity include the recurrence of such phrasing as “in the same way,” “in the same manner,” or “is the same as,” and the rhetorical question “shouldn’t we also say?” Like his predecessors, Lafitau assumed the self-evident status of conformities, and he even occasionally abandons his own role in drawing comparisons altogether. At the conclusion of a section on musical instruments and dance in ancient rites, he obviates the anticipated comparison with the Huron and Iroquois: “Il me semble avoir déjà si bien dépeint nos Sauvages dans ce que je viens de décrire des Sacrifices et des solemnités des Anciens, que je ne croirais pas avoir besoin d’ajouter rien davantage” (It seems to me that, in the foregoing descriptions of the sacrifices and ceremonies of the ancients, I have already described so well [those of] the Indians that I believe that there is no need to add anything by an additional description). Descriptions and comparisons are not driven by sectarian conviction, nor do they obey the logic of scientific comparison, not least because Lafitau ignores the differences that generate categories. Even though he uses concepts like “worship”
“offering,” “sacrifice,” and “initiation,” he does not systematically derive their general features to construct ritual types.\textsuperscript{36}

Although Lafitau was reintroduced in the twentieth century as the rootstock of the social-scientific method, the \textit{Moeurs} elicited caustic criticism in the decades following its publication.\textsuperscript{37} Commenting on Lafitau’s theses about the diffusion of cultures and the origins of Native peoples of the Americas, Voltaire was characteristically sarcastic:


[He would derive the Americans from the ancient Greeks and these are his reasons: the Greeks have myths, some Americans have them too. The first Greeks went hunting, the Americans go too. The first Greeks had oracles, the Americans have sorcerers. They danced at the festivals in Greece, they dance in America too. It must be avowed these reasons are convincing.\textsuperscript{38}]

By mimicking Lafitau’s conformities in condensed and simplified form, Voltaire exposes their fallacy. Any coincidences of material life like hunting or those of religious life such as oracles, sorcerers, and ritual dances do not originate in historical contact, as Lafitau assumed, but can be explained instead by our shared humanity. Corneille de Pauw also found Lafitau’s conformities wanting. Unlike Voltaire, he recognized that “les superstitions religieuses des peuples de l’Amérique ont eu un rapport sensible avec celles qu’ont pratiqué les nations de l’ancien continent” (the religious superstitions of the peoples of America had a perceptible relation with those that the nations of the ancient continent practised), but he quickly takes a similar stance of rational resistance to the ostensible resemblance and proposes, like Voltaire, that similarities can be explained by the human condition: “malgré la diversité des climats, l’imbecilité de l’esprit humain a été constante et immuable” (despite the diversity of climates, the imbecility of the human mind has been constant and unwavering).\textsuperscript{39} In his \textit{History of America}, William Robertson echoes others’ objections to Lafitau’s claim that Native Americans originated in the old world, and argues that any similitude comes from “situation” and “state of society.” Robertson goes on to critique the
conformities of religious rites in particular as “destitute of solid foundation,” explaining that “we may ascribe this uniformity, which in many instances seems very amazing, to the natural operation of superstitions and enthusiasm upon the weakness of the human mind.” Again, the admission of “amazing” resemblances of customs is followed by an insistence on a simpler explanation: “the natural operation of superstitions.” Any conformities can be replaced by the assertion of a single, overarching cause: mental weakness. These criticisms are posited as correctives to the analogical method and its misguided historical speculation.

The idea that mental weakness enables pagan superstition has deep roots in Western philosophy and Christian theology. If Pauw’s and Robertson’s explanation of similarities between polytheistic cults is not entirely novel, they nonetheless replace its conventional terms with a universalist premise that allowed Enlightenment writers to hold up the mirror to our mental frailties. Although their ridicule is biting and their accounts apparently more persuasive than Lafitau’s immoderate comparisons, they do not definitively refute his analogical approach. Having acknowledged that the resemblances between pagan superstitions are indeed perceptible, they sidestep them by imposing, in their place, a form of psychological profiling, which separates those who possess ratiocinative powers from the unenlightened who remain naturally superstitious. Enlightenment primitivism has long been critiqued for its covert denial of human equality and for unethical blindness to the cultural integrity of non-Western cultures. The cultural politics of comparison notwithstanding, I would argue that the stakes of a pagan mentality may lie elsewhere. Voltaire, Pauw, and Robertson pretend that similarities between religious customs of different groups are irrelevant by conjuring the explanatory power of universal mental weakness. This anthropocentric theory also sets aside the relation in customary worship to any being that may not be perceived empirically. That is, if all pagan superstitions arise from a mental predisposition to fear or awe, ritual’s mediation of the human and nonhuman is nullified. Seen from this angle, the conformity – even with its desultory arguments and convoluted rhetoric – recasts the high Enlightenment’s confidence in the human sciences as incapable of theorizing such mediations.

**Bacchic Rites**

As we have seen, Lafitau proposes the conformity of indigenous religious customs “with that of the first times in its manifestations and
with what were called, in antiquity, the bacchanalian orgies." This hypothesis, which is largely overlooked by scholars of Lafitau, is central to the project. It is found in the book’s introduction, and is restated early in the chapter on religion: “Tout le fonds de la Religion ancienne des Sauvages de l’Amérique est le même que celui des Barbares, qui occupèrent en premier lieu la Grèce, et qui se répandirent dans l’Asie, le même que celui des Peuples qui suivirent Bacchus dans ses expéditions militaires, le même enfin qui servit ensuite de fondement à toute la Mythologie payenne, et aux fables des Grecs.” (The entire basis of the former religion of the American Indian as well as that of the barbarians who first occupied Greece, spreading later into Asia, is the same as the followers of Bacchus in his military expeditions, and as that which served afterward as the basis of all pagan mythology and of the Greek myths.) In a footnote to this section, he adds that “according to Servius, people called orgies all rites that had the name of sacrifice in Greece and that of ceremony in Rome.” Lafitau’s several statements of the conformity of the Bacchic rites to pagan religious cult as a whole, he boldly subsumes all paganism into one reputedly licentiousness, violent, and irrational cult that gripped a huge portion of the ancient world. It is the cult of the god who, according to Euripides’s Bacchae, travelled through Asia and attracted crowds of followers, returning to Thebes only to have his rites banned by his cousin, King Pentheus. Bacchus then takes his vengeance on the city as his followers, the Bacchae, wreak havoc, ripping a herd of cows to pieces with their bare hands before performing omophagy on Pentheus.

Bacchus, or as the god is known in Greek, Dionysus, has been described by contemporary classicists as “the most complex and multifaceted of all the Greek gods.” In post-Nietzschean interpretations of Dionysus, this complexity stems from the god’s polarities and contradictions: life/death, suffering/ecstasy, mortal/immortal. Dionysus’s complexity is symbolic, but it also derives from a complicated and little-known history of the cult’s cosmopolitan transmission. In the myths, Dionysus was a foreign god, the “étrange étranger,” which suggests that the cult was taken by the Greeks from elsewhere before spreading widely by late antiquity. Henk Versnel argues that the Dionysian myths of cultic transit may be the first reflection in antiquity on the mobility of religion. Seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century antiquarians and mythologists were not unaware of the complex nature of the god and his cult; they note that Bacchus was called Biformis for his appearances as both a youth and elder, Bimater for having two
mothers (born from the womb of Semele and from the thigh of Zeus), or Dithyrambus for being twice born, and also Liber pater because he frees his followers from constraint. François Pomey’s popular *Pantheon* includes a lengthy entry on Bacchus with separate sections on his birth, names, actions, sacrifices, and historical interpretation of the cult. Pomey concludes with a moral allegorization of the god of wine—“the cradle of life, but yet the grave of reason.” While Bacchus continued to represent the passion that deranges one’s reason or the social threat of enthusiasm, there was increasing interest in gathering a more complete inventory of the god’s depictions and supplementing the written sources with archaeological descriptions of medals and sculptures. And, euhemerist interpretations of the god multiplied: Dionysus was assumed to have been a real personage who was later deified. The turn to euhemerism from allegorism put additional pressure on the question of Bacchus’ actual origins, which were possibly Greek, Egyptian, or Judaic, as well as putting pressure on the question of the cult’s history. There may have been more than one Bacchus, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars surmised, or only one god whose cult spread across occidental–oriental realms. In attempting to answer these difficult questions, several eighteenth-century mythologists and antiquarians rationalize the stories by explaining the multiple and inconsistent histories, like much of ancient religion generally, as intentional chicanery. Thus Antoine Banier, the early eighteenth-century Catholic author of the influential compendium, *La mythologie et les fables expliquées par l’histoire* (1738–40), dealt with the various stories of Bacchus’s origins this way: “Il semble que les anciens aient répandu à dessein … l’obscurité mystérieuse” (It would seem that the Ancients had formed a design to throw a veil of obscurity over the true history). In *The New Pantheon* (1753), Samuel Boyse dismisses the possibility of a historical Bacchus and sees the god as little more than a gross mystification: “no real Bacchus ever existed … he was only a masque or figure of some concealed truth.”

Lafitau admits the inconsistencies in Bacchus’ mythology, but rather than treating them as obstacles to the production of rational knowledge, he deploys them for other purposes. Lafitau concurs that Bacchus is the same god as the Egyptian Osiris, and equates him with other pagan deities: “la divinité, le soleil, nôtre premier père, et les types du libérateur” (the divinity, the sun, our first father and the types of liberator). Moreover, Lafitau sees a resemblance between the accrual of the names and attributes of pagan deities as seen here with Osiris/Bacchus/first
father/liberator, etc. and that of the Christian God. Lafitau writes that God is known as the Redeemer and as Christ. As Christ he has human and divine natures: as human, God is identified under the name Adam, the first father and sinner, and as divine, known by symbolic names, “Soleil de Justice, la lumière du Monde, le Pain Céleste” (the Sun of Justice, the Light of the World, Celestial Bread). This conformity between Christ and Bacchus works on more than one level: both are father figures, both are liberator figures, and both have multiple names and attributes, but are not a multiplicity of separate deities. Both are (the) one. For Lafitau, theistic multiplicity is not a veil, and therefore he does not rationalize Bacchus’s cult by attempting to unmask discrepancies as a conspiracy of obfuscation. Resemblances, once again, lead to identity, and in the special logic of the conformity, the one cult of Bacchus subsumes all pagan rituals.

The true stakes of Lafitau’s conformity of “all former religion” with the “followers of Bacchus” lies, however, in those who performed the rites more than in the god who leads them. There are two groups of Bacchus’s followers according to the mythological traditions: the mixed-gender participants in the bacchanal or orgia, a public ritual, and second, the bacchantes, a group of female initiates in the mystery cult of Bacchus, which is a private and secret rite. Lafitau correlates both groups to indigenous Americans, “L’image en est toute naturelle dans ce nouveau Monde” (The image [of these followers of Bacchus] is quite familiar in the New World). The key feature of public rite of orgia and the mystery cult of Bacchus is that the participants are variously described as being out of their minds, often termed “frenzy” in eighteenth-century texts. In the Moeurs, Lafitau includes an image of a bacchante in frenzy, taken from Jacob Spon’s work on antiquities, which helped revive a visual tradition of the bacchante that had largely disappeared from Renaissance mythologies due to its prurience (Figure 4.1). It closely resembles images of the bacchante in other antiquarian catalogues such as that of La Chausse’s Le grand cabinet romain ou receuil d’antiquitez romaines and Bernard de Montfaucon’s frequently cited L’Antiquité expliquée (Figure 4.2). Antoine Banier describes bacchantes as running “toutes échevelées avec des grimaces et des contorsions affreuses, branlant la tête d’une manière effrayante, et ressemblant en tout à des sorcenées” (loose and dishevelled in grimaces and contorsions, tossing their heads in a frightful manner, and in every thing resembling mad women). This image of Bacchic frenzy reinforced its reputation as drunken and salacious degeneracy, but Lafitau aims to
prove that these rites were corrupted only in later antiquity, that is, by the time the Romans famously proscribed them. In his section on the bacchanals of antiquity, Lafitau inserts a passage from the ancient Greek geographer, Strabo, which addresses the mystery cult of Bacchus and the public bacchanals. Strabo explains that all these rites in which frenzy enters are, in fact, in accord with “nature and reason.” He explains why:

in the first place, the relaxation draws the mind away from human occupations and turns the real mind towards that which is divine; and, secondly, the religious frenzy seems to afford a kind of divine inspiration and to be

Figure 4.1. Lafitau, *Moeurs des sauvages*, Vol. 1, Plate 17, Figure 9. Taken from Jacob Spon in Jan Gruter, *Miscellaneae Eruditae Antiquitatis*, 2 vols. (Lyon, 1685), used to illustrate the “Isiac cross.” This item is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Mary Helen McMurran
very like that of the soothsayer; and, thirdly, the secrecy with which the sacred rites are concealed induces reverence for the divine, which is to avoid being perceived by our human senses; and, fourthly, music, which includes dancing as well as rhythm and melody, at the same time, by the delight it affords and by its artistic beauty, brings us in touch with the divine.\textsuperscript{57}
Where Lafitau’s contemporaries had consigned the bacchante to indecipherable madness, this passage from Strabo makes sense of the image of the bacchante – her kinetic, skyward-bent pose and her solitary religiosity – which is the antithesis of the period’s typical depictions of pagans, who appear in the illustrations to works like Lafitau’s or Bernard and Picart’s as prostrate worshippers gravely subjugating themselves to their idols, or whose bodies, if animated by dance, remain in the circular formation of communal regulation.58 Lafitau adds that he takes Strabo’s explanation of Bacchic frenzy “comme un principe” (as a principle), suggesting that the quotation is not merely a defence of the piety of ancient bacchanals, but the conformity that defines all ancient and indigenous pagan cult.

First, the passage reinforces that Bacchic rites and by extension, pagan cult, do not consist in formal acts alone, but in something that the participant undergoes. In the mystery cults, as Sarah Iles Johnston explains: “initiates into mysteries not only did and said things, as part of their initiation, but experienced things … those in the cult of Dionysus are said to be bebaccheumenoi (they have been ‘bacchiated’).”59 Second, Strabo states that the initiate reaches the divinity through the “real mind,” which is drawn away from its human occupations, and further, that the rite is properly done in secret to avoid being perceived. These parts of the passage evoke a dualism of the senses and mind, the former leading away from divinity and the latter towards it. Yet, Strabo’s last point appears to contradict such dualism. The passage ends with melody and rhythm inducing the sense-experience of “delight,” which brings the bacchante “in touch with the divine.” This pleasure is further connected to the aesthetic or “artistic beauty” of dance and music, reinforcing the godliness of sensory experience. Perhaps the passage is not at odds with itself, however. Frenzy moves into or “enters” the initiate by means of several corollary motions of relaxing, receiving, inducing, and “being in touch with” in a dialectical move from the senses into the mind and then back to the senses. Elsewhere in the religion chapter, Lafitau addresses ancient and Native American theurgy, or communication with the gods, and returns to “des Initiations des Orgies.”60 Specifically, he notes that in all cases, the soul is cleansed of the “contagion of the senses” as a preliminary step. Despite this apparent dualism of the contemplative mind and the earthly senses, he quotes cryptic passages from Pausanius, Dio Chrysostom, Apuleius, and Plato to explain that the purification of the senses subsequently brings initiates back to their senses in a heightened state of perception and knowledge. Lafitau
paraphrases Dio Chrysostom, a Greek orator and philosopher who lived during the Roman imperial era: “un homme initié dans cet état de vision mystérieuse, aux oreilles de qui plusieurs voix se sont entendre, sous les yeux duquel se présentent en spectacle plusieurs scènes différentes” (a man initiated into this state of mystic vision to whose ears many voices make themselves heard, under whose eyes many different scenes present themselves). In his dissertation on religious practices quoted above, Jean-Frédéric Bernard explains that the rationality of proper worship consists in expressionless mental contemplation, and that pagan rituals are fraught with excesses that distract them from pure meditation. Lafitau reconsiders this supposedly inferior mentality of pagans and its dependence on sensory allure. Pagan cult does not mire the participant in sense-perception as a diversion from the supreme being, but rather, according to the ancients, disrupts the senses and mind to restore them.

Let us return, then, to the significance of this conformity between the bacchanalia and all pagan cult. The conformity, first of all, does not proceed by using descriptors of observed pagan practices for the purposes of outlining a formal category, for Bacchic rites are not a particular entity, but a historical and translocal adaptation. Lafitau suggests that pagan cult is also a transport of the mind from the senses and back into the senses, and an ineffable event of “being in touch with” the deity. To define Bacchic rites as the essence of pagan cult is, in fact, to upset the idea that ritual is reducible to a set of observable external signs or prescriptions for action. Thus, ethnographic descriptions of pagan rites did not necessarily change European attitudes about religion from close-minded belief to tolerant secularization. Rather, such descriptions, reinforcing the link between externalized sensory experience and meta-sensory being, appear to preserve the nonrationality in which the mind, the senses, and divinity remain conjugated, as consequent to empirical observation.

It would oversimplify the Moeurs to assume that if it is not scientific ethnography with secularist effects, then its engagement with religious practices is itself religiously motivated. Lafitau’s apparent defence of pagan ritual may be allied with natural religion, but to argue that it also serves a Counter-Reformation ideology in the wake of Protestant anti-ritualism, or as a justification of Catholic missions, which were widely known for their emphasis on ritual, is insufficient. Pagan ceremonies, elaborated in the Moeurs through the conformities between ancient and native pagans, grapple with a relation to (the one) being as distinct
from the monotheists’ god – further evinced in the consistent use of terms “divinity” or “supreme being.” Is the divine immanent in the human mind and then expressed in signs of human worship? Or is ritual frenzy the agent by which a return of the mind to the senses newly accommodates the divine each time it is carried out? The *Moeurs* stops short of providing an answer, but its particular dedication to the conformity effectively resists the regime of collecting, accumulating, and ordering knowledge.

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault put analogical thinking and its hermeneutic circularity to rest at the end of the Renaissance. He explains that the uniform layer of interwoven signs and things breaks down, and similitude comes to be seen as deceptive and quixotic. Since the publication of Foucault’s work, the dominant model for interpreting many aspects of European thought, and perhaps particularly ideas about non-Europeans, has been to analyse representations as constructions of a knowledge regime that was made possible by the liberation from premodern analogy. A more complete account of pagan superstition reveals that it absorbed analogical thinking, exemplified here by the conformity. If Lafitau’s bewildering analogies are reconsidered, they may provide a re-entry to the conjunctions of embodied practices, mentalities, and spirit-worlds.

NOTES


2 Pierre Bayle, Balthasar Bekker, Bernard de Fontenelle, Voltaire, Gerhard Vossius, and numerous English Deists wrote on these questions in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

3 Analogies were also made between indigenous religions, ancient paganism and the survivals of pagan-like traditions of European Christendom, as well as Roman Catholic rituals or “pagano-papism” often for more polemical purposes.

5 Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book That Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard’s Religious Ceremonies of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 221. Jean-Frédéric Bernard and Bernard Picart, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (Amsterdam, 1723–43), http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/picart/index.html. Asia, the Americas, and Africa occupy two volumes. With over 130 folio-page engravings, borrowed or re-engraved from existing works, the pagan volumes are the most extensively illustrated portion of the work.


8 Ibid.


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Research Institute, 2010), 331. Also see Marcel Detienne, Comparing the Incomparable, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), and Barbara Maria Stafford, Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), both of whom defend the experimentalist comparison.

17 Pierre Mussard, Les conformités des cérémonies modernes avec les anciennes (Leiden, 1667), translated into English as Roma Antiqua Recens (London, 1732); Jonas Porée, Histoire des cérémonies et des superstitions, qui se sont introduites dans l’Église (Amsterdam, 1717); Conyers Middleton, A Letter From Rome, 2nd ed. (London, 1729).

18 La Créquinière’s work, published in Brussels, 1704, was reprinted in Bernard and Picart’s Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses, and translated by the deist writer John Toland into English in 1705.


21 Ibid.


26 Ibid., 1:3–4, trans., 1:27.
27 Ibid.
30 See, for example, Lafitau, Moeurs, 1:129, trans., 1:172 and 1:453, trans., 1:280.
31 Lafitau, Moeurs, 1:7, trans., 1:30.
33 Lafitau, Moeurs, 1:179, trans., 1:133.
36 One reason for the elisions of cultural differences is a practical one: he was probably unable to produce a detailed ethnographic account of Native American religious customs because many rites were no longer practised, and even if they were, missionaries would probably not have been privy to most of them, as opposed to other kinds of Native customs. Lafitau thus writes that he had limited knowledge of the initiation rites of the Huron, Iroquois, and Algonquian, and even less of the Virginians, though he is certain they are alike. “Ils eussent déjà perdu beaucoup de leurs coutumes, lorsque les Europeans ont commencé à les fréquenter” (they have lost many of their first customs and since contact with Europeans altered them even more). Lafitau, Moeurs, 1:336, trans., 1:217. See also 1:282, trans., 1:189.
37 Also see the review of Lafitau’s Moeurs in Bibliothèque française: ou Histoire littéraire de la France 4 (1724): 109–20 and 5 (1725): 330–41. Lafitau was praised by the Jesuits’ own Journal de Trévoux 22 (1722): 2189–92; 24 (1724):
1565–1609; and 25 (1725): 197–239. Thanks to Andreas Motsch for these and other documents regarding Lafitau.


41 See above n. 33.


43 Ibid., 1:114n, trans., 1:95n.


48 See Martin Muslow, “Antiquarianism and Idolatry: The Historia of Religions in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Historia: Empiricism and


53 Ibid., 1:220, trans., 1:156.


56 Lafitau, Moeurs, 1:185, trans., 1:137.


58 See Lafitau, Moeurs, vol. 1, plate 7, figure 1, which is a re-engraving from Theodor de Bry’s America (1590) from a lost watercolour by Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues of the Timucua Indians of northeast Florida circa 1562–5. Bernard and Picart reused de Bry’s illustrations of American rituals for Cérémonies et coûtumes. See also Lafitau, Moeurs, vol. 1, plate 18, figure 1 for which no existing visual source has been identified; and vol. 2,
plate 6, figure 1, also re-engraved from Theodor de Bry’s America which is altered from John White’s watercolour of religious dance of Virginians. See Kim Sloan, A New World: England’s First View of America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 110–11, 116–17.


60 Lafitau, Moeurs, 1:342, trans., 1:219.

61 Ibid., 1:342, trans., 1:220.


