


Trading Zones Between Thick and Thin: Anthropological Description as Scaffold or Mosaic

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ABSTRACT

Referring to the work of historian of science Peter Galison, I argue that anthropology requires thin description as an essential counterpart for thick description. Thin accounts provide the scaffolding within which thick descriptions sit. Galison uses the idea of a “trading zone” connecting different communities who, despite their differences (possibly including different ontologies), manage to coordinate joint activity. This idea works well for anthropological accounts of many societies, not least in relation to silent trade, in which exchange occurs without direct communication so that there is literally no sharing of meanings! Anthropology consists of mosaics of thick descriptions, held within thinly described structures. Galison uses what he calls “laminated descriptions” to comprehend interaction in trading zones. Ideas from complexity theory, emergence, and autopoiesis can be applied to avoid forms of positivistic reductionism. Finally, I give a sparse, summary account of change in Mambila traditional religion in terms of a trading zone of influences.

RÉSUMÉ

En référence aux travaux de l'historien des sciences Peter Galison, je soutiens que l'anthropologie a besoin de la description succincte comme contrepartie essentielle de la description dense. Les descriptions succinctes fournissent le cadre dans lequel s'inscrivent les descriptions dense. Galison utilise l'idée d'une « zone d'échange » entre différentes communautés qui, malgré leurs différences (y compris éventuellement des ontologies différentes), parviennent à coordonner leurs activités communes. Cette idée fonctionne bien pour les descriptions anthropologiques de nombreuses sociétés, notamment en ce qui concerne le commerce silencieux, dans lequel l'échange se fait sans communication directe, de sorte qu'il n'y a littéralement aucun partage de sens! L'anthropologie consiste en une mosaïque de descriptions denses, contenues dans des structures décrites de manière succincte. Galison utilise ce qu'il appelle des « descriptions laminées » pour comprendre les interactions dans les zones d'échange. Les idées issues de la théorie de la complexité, de l'émergence et de l'autopoïèse aident à éviter les formes de réductionnisme positiviste. Enfin, je donne un compte rendu succinct et sommaire de l'évolution de la religion traditionnelle Mambila, en termes de zone d'échange d'influences.

[Correction added on 10 February 2026, after first online publication: The copyright line was changed.]

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Within a certain cultural arena—“the trading zone”—two dissimilar groups can find common ground. They can exchange fish for baskets, enforcing subtle equations of correspondence between quantity, quality, and type, and yet utterly disagree on the broader (global) significance of the items exchanged.

Peter Galison (1997, 46)

1 | Introduction: Trading Zones as Frames for Anthropological Representations

This paper results from my ongoing attempts to understand the changing patterns of Mambila religious practice over the last hundred or more years.¹ The academic terms available for both description and analysis are problematic, and they do not sit well with local understandings. I consider below the ethnographic example of changes in Mambila religious practice to exemplify my general argument. Peter Galison’s idea of *trading zones* provides a response to the problems raised by ethnography and its analysis, providing a starting point for thinking about human societies. This has beneficial consequences for our theoretical apparatus, in that it promotes both humility and parsimony of description. In particular, it prompts reconsideration of thick and thin descriptions and their interrelationship. (It might also work self-reflexively as a way of modelling our fissiparous and dispute-riven discipline: a different issue, best explored elsewhere.)

2 | From Science Studies to Anthropology

Peter Galison (1997) developed the idea of trading zones in his magisterial study of different experimental traditions in physics, drawing heavily on ideas from anthropology. He studied (mainly) anglophone particle physicists, identifying one tradition that created images and another that counted things (hence his title, *Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics*), although both groups were ostensibly studying “the same thing”: subatomic physics. I want to complete the circle by considering how his characterization of interacting groups of physicists can, in turn, help anthropology to comprehend many different social groups (which have surprising parallels to groups of physicists).

His conclusion works well for anthropology if we substitute “society” or “culture” for his “science”:

It is the disorder of [society]—the laminated, finite, partially independent strata supporting one another; it is the disunification of [society]—the intercalation of different patterns of argument—that is responsible for its strength and coherence. (1997, 844)

His preface contains another excellent example: “But between and among these subcultures . . . lie substantial border territories, and it is only by exploring the dynamics of those border regions that we can see how the whole fits together” (1997, xxx. I have omitted “of physics”).

I consider here the lessons Galison offers to anthropology, rather than reviewing or summarizing his book.² Rather than talking

about translation, shared ontologies, or cultural presuppositions, Galison prompts us to think about social life as a series of “coordination problems” that are resolved in what he calls “trading zones.” These are regions of “exchange between different groups or individuals in which some material and some theoretical moves are shared despite ‘global’ disjunction” (Galison 1999, 280). This is a good starting point for anthropology because it enables us to discard much conceptual baggage.³ That discarding may be provisional and temporary: some rejected concepts may need to be reinstated later. I suspect that less theoretical baggage is needed than many assume. The fundamental building blocks for traditional anthropology include culture, ethnicity, and language. Anthropology might look very different without them. Moreover, its conceptual baggage also includes ontology, coloniality, and personhood, so my position also challenges recent anthropological theory. Some of this baggage has been questioned by developments in multispecies anthropology; I return to this below.

Galison’s model of trading zones provides a good framework for anthropology because it aids understanding of social groups without assuming that they are homogenous. It is safe to assume that all social groups have their own competitions, politics, and disputes, and yet most groups manage to “rub along together” over time. Moreover, Galison’s model helps us comprehend and describe how people manage their lives in the face of uncertainty and incomplete comprehension. I conclude that, instead of feeling obliged to choose between ethnographically rich “thick description” and statistically purified “thin description,” we should recognize that we need *both* and think more about how they can be made to work together productively.

3 | Incommensurability Starts at Home

Consider some stereotypical English-language academic sayings:

I just don’t understand Professor W.

Professor X uses the same words as I do, but in ways that I cannot follow: They clearly mean something quite different than I do when they say Y.

Professor Z does not understand what I am saying. We have been talking past each other for years.⁴

The weirdness of such stereotypes is that, although the people concerned often dislike each other, this is not always the case. Many people have disagreed bitterly in seminar rooms and yet remained friends; some readers will have witnessed this. To take such utterances seriously would be entirely counter to the spirit of cross-cultural understanding. If we cannot understand our own people (whoever *we* are), then how can we hope to understand others? Since in this stereotype we are ostensibly speaking “the same” language, our lack of comprehension cannot be attributed to problems of translation, so it seems that incommensurability begins at home.

In response to these concerns, I consider here how Galison’s sophisticated transactionalism can be used to redefine the foundations of social anthropology. At the risk of hubris, I want my

treatment to be as minimal as possible, in line with arguments for a sparse and modest anthropology (Zeitlyn 2022a, 2023). As noted above, this appears to complete a circle, Galison himself having been heavily influenced by anthropological ideas. However, the result is perhaps less a circle than a spiral. It is analogous to the pattern or shape made by people pulling themselves up, self-consciously, by their own bootstraps.

The point is that, if incommensurability starts at home, then we need to change a lot of conceptual baggage, including *incommensurability* itself, since this suggests that we can no longer understand ourselves.⁵ *Ontological* approaches are inapplicable since we cannot assume commonality within a group: If the default assumption is heterogeneity, then *an* ontology cannot serve to summarize a whole group. (Further, to talk of multiple ontologies within one group is self-defeating: The ontology of a group is the essential summary that unites (binds) all its members—almost as if someone had been reading Tolkien.) *Culture*, if not completely inapplicable, must be radically redefined to include heterogeneous, incommensurable subgroups. The most extreme extension of such reworking is multispecies anthropology, where humans and the framings of human language are no longer central (see e.g., Kirksey and Helmreich 2010).

The challenge is to summarize adequately: to generalize about a group without losing sight of its unhomogenized variation. Galison's (1997, 783) solution is to develop what he calls "laminated descriptions" of the larger community. As described below, thin descriptions are often more useful here, shocking though this may be to anthropological orthodoxy. In the spirit of Galison, I believe that *mosaicked* accounts of trading zones are helpful for producing overview summaries, especially when they include ideas which help us avoid positivistic reductionism, for example, from complexity theory: emergence and autopoiesis.

4 | Parties and Factions

We need ways to comprehend and describe how people manage their lives in the face of uncertainty and incomprehension. These themes are addressed in Robert Frost's ([1914] 1979) much anthologized poem "Mending Wall." At the risk of literalism and of ruining a good poem, it is the mutual activity (which need not include mutual comprehension, let alone shared ontologies) of fence-mending that makes for neighborliness. Hence, "good fences make good neighbors."

Social theories that essentialize and homogenize are not suited to deal with the factionalism that exists even in the most homogeneous social groups. Sex and gender, age, and the possession of secrets or physical power, *inter alia*, underlie such factions and hierarchies. Subdivisions are always potential or latent and may be crystallized by particular events, sometimes recurrently, in the context of rituals (e.g., Mambila men's and women's masquerades, discussed briefly below) before again slipping below the public radar.

In other words, social groups are never homogeneous in the way that collections of molecules are; social life is non-ergodic: Despite the successes of epidemiology and demography, individual people in a population cannot be treated as equivalents like

the molecules in a gas. Much anthropology is about precisely what statistical human sciences leave out (Zeitlyn 2022b, 88–89). We can summarize this by thinking of social groups as trading zones.

4.1 | Coordination Problems

In effect, Galison is asking *how little* coordination is needed for successful collaboration to occur. He considers "the tension between the twin poles of autonomy and interconnection" and suggests that intercalation can be seen as a way in which separate groups can make "common cause" (1997, 782). He uses the "trading zone" as a way of conceptualizing cooperation (of more or less limited scope) between different factions, which may be discernibly different only during the intra-action (Barad's term, explained below) that crystallizes them:

I will call this polycultural history of the development of physics intercalated because the many traditions coordinate with one another without homogenization. Different traditions . . . meet—even transform one another—but for all that, they do not lose their separate identities and practices. (1997, 782)

The idea of intercalated polycultural histories meshes well with current developments in anthropology, which recognize the coexistence of multiple subgroups and viewpoints, despite the complications involved in summarizing and characterizing that complexity. Viewing a social group as a trading zone is a productive starting point for addressing the challenges involved in such characterization.

5 | Trading Zone Implications 1: Theoretical Parsimony

5.1 | Trading Zones as an Alternative to Translation in Anthropology

Trade focuses on coordinated, local actions, enabled by the *thinness* of interpretation rather than the thickness of consensus. Thin description is precisely what makes it possible for the experimentalist and the theorist to communicate, albeit in a register that by no means captures the full world of either, let alone both.

Galison (2010, 36, his emphases)

The parties to a trade don't need full information about each other. "What they need is consensus in a restricted zone, a zone where coordination is good enough."

Galison (2010, 37, his quote marks)

Translation is an enduring and productive metaphor for the anthropological enterprise, but even this could be jettisoned or curtailed. It may not be as productive a metaphor as we thought. Not only Galison's assertions but also the practice of "silent trade," as we shall see, suggest that social interaction can occur without it. This takes us back to some anthropological

ancestors. Marcel Mauss was happy to apply Durkheim's idea of the "total social fact" to markets and exchange more generally. Mauss viewed markets and exchange as providing analytic lenses through which to explore cultural variation (see Hart 2007, 2014 and *The Gift*, Mauss 2016, trans. Jane Guyer).

5.2 | Silence in the Trading Zone: Approaches to Incommensurability and Limits to Translation

Notwithstanding the above, the practice of "silent trade" is a limiting case for the implications of the existence of a market.⁶ This idea has haunted academics from Herodotus onward. In silent trade, although the parties never meet (let alone talk), they manage to coordinate exchanges by laying out goods alongside each other in a neutral space until agreement is reached that the two piles are "equivalent," or at least "sufficient," at which point each party takes the pile provided by the other. (To reject the transaction, they remove their own goods.) As well as a historical literature on this, there is also an anthropological one: Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias (1974; see also Green 2013) discussed a range of evidence from West Africa, and James Woodburn's 1988 conference paper (published posthumously in 2016) considers the practice, particularly as it occurs between hunter-gatherers and neighboring agriculturalists.

Woodburn (2016, 491) notes: "If these transactions are the only way in which the partners interact, they are likely to have nothing apart from the content and context of the transactions themselves to guide their interpretations. The likelihood of each having a quite different understanding of what is going on is very great." At this point, I accept that even silent trade requires *some* shared understandings, including the idea of exchange (which may not be fairly characterized as basic or fundamental). Agreement on some idea of the sociality of exchange is required in order for the practice to occur, but this is thin compared to the institutions of money and market. Trading zones may not completely remove the need for translation to achieve coordination, but they *reduce* it considerably.

The fact that parties may have "quite different understandings of what is going on," does not prevent interaction. Full mutual comprehension is not necessary for trade to occur. This was prefigured in John Price's (1980, 90, 94) discussion of different forms of silent trade: He says of a short-distance example between farmers and hunters that trades are utilitarian and occur in a hostile context, although he also notes that it is more like gift exchange than barter. Hostility, especially long-standing enmity (e.g., between farmers and hunters), is unlikely to involve mutual understanding.

Similarly, Daniel Kahneman (2022) discusses "adversarial collaboration" between academics wherein opponents agree to collaborate despite their differences (agreement is not assumed). This contrasts with "angry science," in which opponents snipe and bicker, scoring points but not changing minds.⁷ In psychology, Kahneman has shown how, despite their differences, those who disagree can collaborate in designing experiments or analyzing results. This is a trading zone in practice: Although using different "currencies," people can still find an acceptable exchange rate, either through types of silent trade or (more

usually) through discussion, by talking about boundary objects⁸ and other multifaceted creations that generally mean different things to different sets of users. (This suggests a different sort of trading zone from the one I am discussing here: Anthropology itself [especially four-field anthropology] can be understood as a trading zone!)

A different sort of "trading across differences" persisted for centuries between the Portuguese and the Chinese in Macao, using what João Pina-Cabral (2002, 106) calls "equivocal compatibilities." He discusses fundamental and longstanding disagreements between Chinese and Portuguese commentators, despite which, neither side changed its views. Was a transfer of money in exchange for a child evidence of a system of slavery? What made a child the child of *these* parents? Did affect (love) generate bonds of filiation? All parties believed they knew what was going on, and in their own terms, they did. But the *compatibility* demonstrated by long-term interaction masked *equivocation* about what the other parties meant by their actions and statements.

Such examples show how relatively stable social groupings can work without either shared meanings or translation between subgroups. The extent of homogeneity within a group, therefore, becomes an empirical question. Shared ethnonyms and *assertions* of commonality often mask wide disparities.

6 | For a Complex Transactionalism

I use the term "complex transactionalism" to mean a combination of Galison's transactions in the trading zone and ideas of *emergence* and *autopoiesis* from complexity theory.⁹ As for *emergence*, Karen Barad and Pina-Cabral have argued (in very different ways) that entities (physical, social, and conceptual) emerge from tangled ensembles of interacting entities (my repetition of "entities" is deliberate). To some extent, we can choose which pieces we label as entities rather than ensembles. We can change scales and shift focus so that what seems from one perspective to be a unit may, from another viewpoint, become a mere aspect of an ensemble. This has led Barad (2007, 33; 2010, 267n1) to talk, not about interaction, but about "intra-action," which she understands as a form of mutual configuration in which entangled agencies/entities coconstitute each other. Intra-action emphasizes the fluid boundaries in which different agencies coconstitute each other, including the entanglement of matter and meaning in iterative rounds of engagement. Her account is one of "agential realism," in which agency exists all the way down (and, I would add, all the way up). Emphasizing the fluidity of boundaries and the productivity of borders makes the idea of boundary objects and transactions in and across borders all the more important, which returns us nicely to Galison's notion of transactions in trading zones.

Pina-Cabral (2011, 2020, 2023) has been exploring vagueness, indeterminacy, and the misleading lenses of language. He concludes that "As ethnographic practitioners, we should learn to avoid all-or-nothing arguments (Pina-Cabral 2011) and we should focus on borders as constitutive (as, in fact, Barth demonstrated so long ago, in 1969)" (Pina-Cabral 2020, 795). The vagueness and porosity of borders allow the entanglements of Barad's "intra-action," although Barad would insist that they occur even in those

relatively rare instances where borders are tightly defined. Both Barad and Pina-Cabral use the idea of emergence as a way of thinking about large and complex systems without essentializing or reifying their constituents. As Pina Cabral (2020, 794) puts it:

Emergence, therefore, can never involve a radical launch from its launch pad, as it were, since emergence occurs from within entanglement—that is, through a process in which the parts come to interact with the whole. As such, emergence can never be rid of leakage, because the entity’s very existence as an entity is dependent on the background upon which it arose.

Emergent phenomena have real physical importance. A classic example is air pressure, which is an emergent property of molecules in the air resulting from molecules colliding with one another. Nonetheless, it is an important and measurable feature of the world—for all that it consists “only” of collisions between molecules. In social terms, emergent properties cannot be reduced to (or analyzed away as) their constituents.¹⁰ Paradoxically, the individuals who at any one moment comprise a social group both *do* and *do not* create or recreate key features of that group on an ongoing basis. They create, but not from nothing: They must work with the materials at hand, so they generally produce modified variants. Consider the way that members of a group receive, slightly alter, and then transmit their language to succeeding generations: What is called a language is a *relatively* stable, emergent feature of a social group. The reference to stability points to the other term from complexity theory mentioned above: *autopoiesis*. Central to this are self-consciousness and feedback loops, “which enable self-consciousness to affect the subject in a self-reproducing system,” so generating relative stability (Zeitlyn 2022b, 23–24). Language illustrates this as well as emergence. It is now some 21 generations since Shakespeare wrote his plays and poems: Given the immense changes in the interim, it is remarkable, not that his language is hard to understand, but that it is comprehensible at all! Immediate feedback during a conversation makes people alter what they say and how they say it. At the risk of being unfair to the large literature on language change and conversational interaction, this allows gradual change but enforces continuity among the community of fellow speakers, for all that older people complain that today’s youths are incomprehensible. Such complaints and the bucking against them are parts of the autopoietic process: Almost all the children of those youths will be raised to speak “the same” language as their parents, against which they will buck in their turn, but, in generational terms, only moderately.

Christina Toren (2012, 66–67; see also 2019, 39) has discussed autopoiesis in a similar fashion¹¹: “Intersubjective sociality is the fundamental condition of human autopoiesis—self-creation, self-organization, self-regulation.” Moreover, she stresses that self-creation does not occur willy-nilly. The historical context is inescapably all (e.g., one cannot *choose* to be a native speaker of a language learned in adulthood¹²). To paraphrase Marx: We make our own history but not in circumstances of our own choosing.¹³

Much of the complexity of social systems is in the intra-actions across levels between emergent features and the constituents from which those and other features emerge. Across time, relative

stability emerges and sustains itself. Thus, the systems we are considering are autopoietic.

7 | Trading Zone Implications 2: Thinness as a Consequence

7.1 | Thin Description/Narrow Bridgeheads Enable Thick Description

All we need to know in that moment is that we agree to exchange—not the structure of the crystal or flute, not their origin, meaning, uses, or provenance. *Nothing* in this swap requires a reference explicitly or, for that matter, implicitly, to money as a commensurable entity, to a universal instrument of value, or to a universal logic. It is the possibility of this relative superficiality — the possibility of a *thin description* — that interests me in the trading zone.

Galison (2010, 35–36; his emphases)

Advocating “thin description” is provocative for anthropologists. We have prided ourselves on producing what Gilbert Ryle (1971) and Geertz (1972, 1973), after him, called “thick description”: one of anthropology’s defining characteristics. We refer to it to differentiate ourselves from other disciplines in the world of big data. It is what we offer to the statisticians who drive that world.

So why might anthropologists, with their focus on thickness, on textured and nuanced understandings, also benefit from thinking about thinness? First, thin descriptions provide contexts for understanding thick descriptions. Second, recognizing situational thinness necessitates the recognition of incompleteness and partiality. This has implications for “decoloniality.” For example, Matthew Edney (1997, 338) discusses the “structures of feeling” subtending imperialism, as exemplified by the cartography of India. In his “critical perspectives” on scientism and empiricism, he asks what happens if we do not assume that the world is knowable. Not assuming a knowable world leads to a very different sort of incompleteness and partiality from those considered elsewhere (e.g., Zeitlyn 2009). I think both sorts are consistent with trading zone approaches. (Whether rejecting knowability would satisfy decolonial theorists is another matter.)

Ryle’s classic discussion (taken up by Geertz) concerns the difference between a wink and a twitch.¹⁴ These are phenomenally (observationally) identical but entirely different in meaning. Different thick descriptions are needed to unpack the difference. These must go beyond the phenomena to include the actor’s intention and the type of interaction concerned. They might involve observers or audiences as well as actors. The issue is not as straightforward as it might appear. We must consider winking and also medical conditions (e.g., blepharospasm and myokymia) as well as misobserved blinking. However, the topic is given a very different twist by Philip and Dianne Ferguson’s (2001) discussion of the meaning of the winks of their disabled son, Ian. He can (sort of) wink and knows it is humorous, but interpreting his actions in the context of mental disability is fraught with difficulty and uncertainty. They endorse Wittgenstein’s (2001, 40) advice to

“move to the rough ground” of practice via his famous injunction, “Don’t ask for the meaning, ask for the use.” On their account, instead of definitions, we need more case studies, through which we can somehow achieve a usable understanding (which may or may not be thick, let alone summarizable as a definition).

We cannot assume that all the parties ascribe the same meaning to what is going on, yet they can successfully interact in trading zones. Hence, my argument is that thin descriptions are needed when discussing a whole system, leaving thick descriptions for component subgroups that have greater internal homogeneity than the overall system.

Paul Shankman (1984) contrasts thick and thin description in a *Current Anthropology* article titled “The Thick and the Thin: On the Interpretive Theoretical Program of Clifford Geertz.” However, he concentrates on thick descriptions and never really discusses the thin of his title. We are left to infer that this is some form of cross-cultural scientific approach. Neither he nor his commentators consider ways in which thick and thin descriptions can be combined. The sort of thin description I propose need not be scientific: As I suggest below, it can provide the scaffolding¹⁵ that supports thick descriptions.

To be clear, I am not advocating for thin description alone. At its best, anthropology consists of patches of thick held in skeins of thin. This characterization fits well with anthropological practice, such as the classic thick descriptions *avant la lettre*: Manchester school extended case studies, developed before Ryle published his original article (and decades before Geertz). We can think of patchy thick descriptions as mosaic tiles that catch the light differently at different moments; sometimes one tile works better than others. So (at the risk of overstretching the metaphor), classical physics had one tile for waves and another for particles; quantum physics replaced these with a single tile that catches the light differently from different viewpoints (like dresses that seem either gold or blue from different angles, or precious stones such as opals), now seeming to be one and now the other, but never both simultaneously.

8 | From Translation to Trading zones and Boundary Objects

As Douglas Hofstadter (2009) suggests, when discussing translation, rather than invoking the pejorative slogan “translator traitor,” it is more helpful to think “translator trader”: any act of translation is a trade-off, with both winners and losers. This helpfully evokes trading zones as a way to talk about subgroups who manage to get along (more or less) despite any incommensurabilities between them. As Galison (1997, 783, his emphases) put it, “Trading partners can hammer out a *local* coordination despite vast *global* differences.” The process of translation is fraught with decisions, each involving both disadvantages and benefits: In Hofstadter’s terms, there are trade-offs. Translations are always incomplete and improvable: As many have pointed out, translation is a good metaphor for anthropology, given that translation is also always possible.¹⁶

However, as in the case of silent trade, and as Galison (1997) might remind us, two or more groups can coexist and coordinate their

actions without translation, even if their understandings of those actions differ. On his account, trading zones can flourish without translation as long as the groups concerned can coordinate without it. The case of silent trade described above is salutary. Another way to coordinate actions without translation is through the use of boundary objects (Star 1989, 2010). As Star and Griesemer ([1989] 2016, 251) put it:

Boundary objects are objects that are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use.

I have discussed boundary objects in relation to divination elsewhere (Zeitlyn 2021), seeing the divinatory procedures (involving spiders, crabs, chickens, cards, tea leaves, hexagrams, charts, etc.) as connecting the clients, who often have pressing concerns, with the diviners and the ontologies associated with the type of divination being used. Boundary objects simultaneously connect and disconnect: They hold connections at a remove, in abeyance. So clients can consult divination without necessarily being party to any ontologies to which the diviners may subscribe. The procedures and technicalities of divinatory praxis may feature in divinatory consultations as boundary objects, having very different resonances for clients and diviners, who are nonetheless able to continue their interactions, in part through their mutual orientation to the boundary object (divination). As Galison might say, differences of opinion and lack of consensus can be managed by the use of boundary objects in a trading zone. Trade technologies such as divination allow people to meet and act together without discussing details, let alone whether or not they share an ontology.

9 | Types of Thinness: Thin Versus Sparse

Thin descriptions can be a response to overweening claims that thick description provides a definitive, authoritative account of a social group or situation. This is the key argument of John Jackson’s (2013) book, *Thin Description*. Jackson uses thinness as a prompt to humility, to protect against the hubris of ethnographic holism. Holism is patently impossible, unachievable. Jackson says we should not aspire to it but stick to thin accounts because these are more honest in their incompleteness than Geertzian claims to have the last word by providing thick descriptions. However, in doing this, Jackson does not give even the thinnest background of the people about whom he is writing.¹⁷ How many African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem are there? I suspect somewhere between one thousand and a million, but I should not have to guess. Jackson is better placed than I to provide a reasonable estimate. (I am conscious that this is a naïve and tin-eared response to Jackson’s argument). His book provides much detail about flying between the United States and Israel, but nothing about how the flights are paid for. Some information about their economic position might be helpful (page 84 gives a clue: “Many of the adult men in the community did construction work”). I agree with his critique of Geertz; however, I think that thick descriptions can be used modestly, without claiming to have

the last word. This can be helped by knowing incompleteness, letting the gaps show. Talia Dan-Cohen's (2019) *Writing Thin* tackles the same issue, building on the work of Sherry Ortner and Annelise Riles. For Dan-Cohen (2019, 915), a turn to thinness prompts us to reflect on our own practice (paralleling Freud's use of the uncanny) because writing thin in the teeth of injunctions to write thick can have the positive effect of "estranging us from the epistemology and aesthetics of anthropological common sense." I believe that the idea of trading zones provides the same beneficial effects.

On the other hand, there is no consensus about what thin description is. A thin description can involve three different things. Thin₁ are background statements, usually unexceptional and uncontroversial,¹⁸ that help to convey some basic understanding to readers unfamiliar with the case. This might be about location and/or an outline of history, economy, religions, and politics (all potentially disputed, but readers need to know what the disputes are about). In a case concerning a virtual community, a thin₁ description might include relevant web addresses, dates of founding, and estimates of numbers. At one level, this is resolutely old-fashioned. A current thin₁ summary paragraph about a social group may use different language from that of 50 years ago, but the contours remain the same.

Not only the contours but also the critiques remain the same. Such summaries say nothing about the individuals who constitute such groups, let alone their sentiments. But this is as much a boon as a failing: It leaves space for the people; it leaves space for others to fill in the blanks in different ways. This was one of the points of my (2023) article on anthropological sparsity and sits well with Jackson's (2013) use of thinness.

Very different is thin₂. A thin₂ description is an analytic summary, an outline of something that might well be the subject of one, or even many, thick descriptions. The development of thin₂ accounts is part of the art of anthropological analysis, and helps establish the connections between broader social phenomena and the minutiae of particular events (so it is not surprising that my first example is from Manchester extended case studies). A thin₂ account is an analytic summary that enables us to connect and compare cases.

A third possibility is "political thinness," a withholding of information, perhaps part of the "art of not being governed" (Scott 2009). The problem with such withholdings is that they result in ignorance, which generally does not stop armies or colonial bullies who are happy to fill knowledge vacuums with their own fantasies. There is a complicated set of discussions to be had about participation and control of information, which I believe needs to be much more nuanced than a blanket statement that only this group of people can or should know about their cultural history and traditions (which often reduces to a blanket critique of anthropology as a proxy for colonization).

Returning to the first two sorts of thinness, consider two paradigmatic examples of thick description. Max Gluckman's thin₁ introduction to his *Analysis Of A Social Situation in Modern*

Zululand summarizes the South African state and its racist structures. This provides the scaffolding that enables readers to understand the detailed description of the events of January 7, 1938, at Ngoma. He concludes with general statements (thin₂) about the "pulls of different values and groups produce strong conflicts in the individual Zulu's personality and in Zululand social structure" (1940, 29).

Much later, Geertz (1972) provided, I think, a deliberately thin (thin₁) introduction to his detailed analysis of a Balinese cock fight. Geertz conveys to the reader the position in which he and his wife found themselves: knowing little, gaining understanding only through participation in the fight and the police raid on it. As he says:

Early in April of 1958, my wife and I arrived, malarial and diffident, in a Balinese village we intended, as anthropologists, to study. A small place, about five hundred people, and relatively remote, it was its own world. We were intruders, professional ones, and the villagers dealt with us as Balinese seem always to deal with people not part of their life who yet press themselves upon them: as though we were not there. For them, and to a degree for ourselves, we were nonpersons, specters, invisible men. (1)

Geertz enables readers to follow the consequences of their participation in the cock fight (and its dispersal by the police). This ends with their acquiring a more generalized understanding of Balinese society. In this case, thick description functions as a stepping stone to a thin₂ summary. For example, on the last page of his article, he says:

The mass festivals at the village temples, which mobilize the whole local population in elaborate hostings of visiting gods—songs, dances, compliments, gifts—assert the spiritual unity of village mates against their status inequality and project a mood of amity and trust. (29)

This is nothing if not a thin₂ description.

Thick descriptions can act as correctives (counterexamples) to the thin descriptions in which they sit. They challenge the theoretical terms used to set the scene, suggesting that some thin descriptions might be more productive than others.¹⁹ Indeed, some thick descriptions may have such density or heft that they tear the skein, or break the scaffolding (depending on which of my metaphors you prefer). This is why we cherish Gluckman's (1940) account of a bridge opening or Leach's (1954, 14) discussion of the inappropriateness of asking whether Nats have legs. These key instances challenge broader, theoretical accounts. In other words, thick descriptions can be counterexamples to thinner descriptions (mostly thin₂ but sometimes also thin₁). I see the *combination* of thick and thin, and their productive juxtaposition, as constituting Galison's laminated descriptions.

10 | Example: Mambila Traditional Religion as a Trading Zone

Finally, let me provide an example from my own research on Mambila traditional religion. I have long struggled to summarize what I have seen in practice and what I have discovered (and inferred) about previous forms of the practices now found in Mambila villages²⁰ (primarily in Cameroon, where most of my fieldwork has been undertaken over the last 40 years). Having resisted pressures to identify an essence or central theme, I am attracted by the idea of religion as a trading zone. Indeed, as this example shows, the practitioners of Mambila traditional religion have some surprising parallels to the physicists studied by Galison.

First, a general, or thin, statement. Mambila traditional religion does not have a doxa or a written theology. There are experts, but no formally recognized priests. There is no body of text that someone with questions can consult. There is an informal division of intellectual labor, whereby questions are referred to, and authority is ceded to the true experts, who are all dead. The general opinion is that “by comparison to the late X we are juniors who know little or nothing.” This provides a useful rebuff to the tedious enquiries of an annoying anthropologist.

Mambila traditional religion involves three broad arcs of practice. There is an un-system of large-scale rituals. There are smaller-scale rituals performed with less ceremony on a day-to-day basis. And there are (or were) rituals concerning the agricultural cycle. Together, these constituents form what is generally referred to as Mambila traditional religion. The large-scale rituals are performed by three groups who do not intercommunicate because of taboos preserving secrecy. These groups involve men in the men’s masquerade (*sùàgà bɔ̀sép*), women in the women’s masquerade (*sùàgà bɔ̀və̀*) and the *mgbe lə* (all men, around five in total, who must *not* be members of the royal family and hence can include foreign anthropologists). All of these are active within *Ngwun* (the rituals surrounding the chief). There are overlaps: the *mgbe lə* also participate in the men’s masquerade; the *marenjo* (senior, titled sisters and wives of the chief), who are central in the women’s masquerade, also play important roles in *Ngwun*, and indeed sometimes informally advise the *mgbe lə* about how the ritual should be performed. The structures of secrecy are such that there can be no shared theology apart from commonplaces and knowledge of what to do when: how to solve the problems involved in coordinating the ritual cycle.

Of course, divisions between subgroups apply in many groups in which secrets are socially important, not just West African groups with masks and *juju*, but in other societies worldwide where the few are privy to secrets which by definition are inaccessible to the uninitiated. For example, Frederik Barth’s (1975) ethnography of the Baktaman in Papua New Guinea raises the prospect of an unending chain of revelation, each level belying the previous one. The system is structured by initiation and repudiation, the politics of selection (who is included, who is left out), and the pragmatics of staging the rituals. The content, the meanings or symbolic forms, which may be of enormous significance to the chosen few at the center, cannot be used to explain the forms of the overall system (despite its fascination for anthropologists and other scholars of religion). It is as if the Gordian knot survives

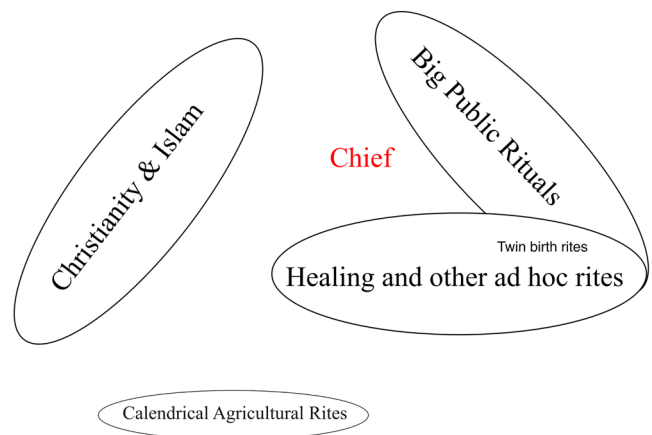
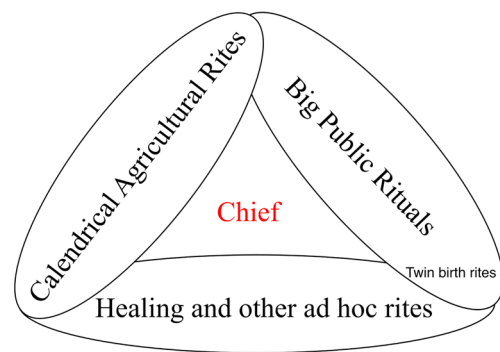


FIGURE 1 | Mambila religion then and now.
[This figure appears in color in the online issue]

the removal of the peg, the knot’s structure being independent of the peg. The features I am considering may be dismissed as unimportant, ephemeral epiphenomena, but they persist and are repeatedly reinvented, so I think them significant. Who provides the food that is eaten? Who cooks and distributes it? Where does the beer come from? These are questions about the *scaffolding* of ritual rather than the ritual itself. To ask them is to effect a sort of figure-ground reversal. A scaffold provides some (albeit incomplete) information about the structure it supports.

In the Mambila case, as in many others, there is a trading zone between those who know the details of a rite and those who do not. This enables the coordination problems to be resolved and the necessary work to be planned and executed. The shape of the resulting network of action through each 2-year cycle, and how this network has changed over time, are summarized in the following diagrams (Figures 1–3). These provide a thin description that would support thicker descriptions of the different component rituals. My first attempt at a thicker description was provided in *Sua in Somie* (1994).

These diagrams are intended to show how the chief’s role has altered since the arrival of Christianity and Islam, the 10-day calendar has become almost irrelevant, and maize cultivation has replaced sorghum. (The calendrical rituals governing the planting and harvesting of sorghum have not been replaced by any ritual concerning maize). By and large, each group of practitioners coordinates their activities without discussing their implications or signification with the other groups. (Some

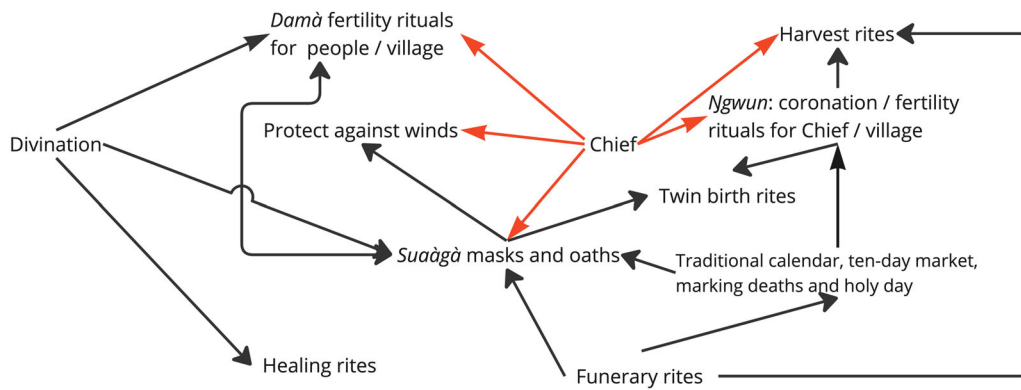


FIGURE 2 | Early 20th-century Mambila religion. This diagram divides the 19th- and early 20th-century activities into three groups: (1) major public rituals, (2) calendrical agricultural rites, and (3) healing and other ad hoc rites. When Christianity and Islam arrived, the chief's role became less central, and the calendrical agricultural rites all but disappeared. The components of Mambila religion can be broken down into more detail. Figures 2 and 3 show how the chief is connected to religious practice and how this has changed. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

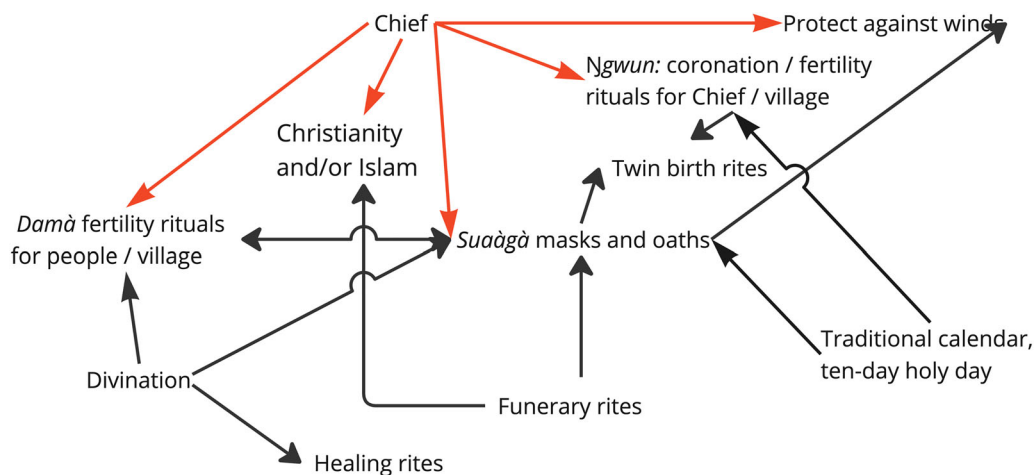


FIGURE 3 | Early 21st-century Mambila religion. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

qualifications to this statement are discussed in Zeitlyn [2025], concerning local arguments about whether Christian choirs and *sùàgà* dancing can both occur at funerals.) The diagrams show the connections between the different constituents of Mambila religious practice. A more complete account (e.g., involving symbolism) is not needed. More detail may be provided by Mambila theologians, but no semantic or symbolic system is or has been necessary to maintain this workable and evolving religious system.

Galison encourages me to perform the figure-ground reversal and make the periphery central to the account. Rather than asking what it means (to participants or academics) or for a symbolic system encompassing all these actions, I want to ask how the trading zone is maintained: how the cycles are put together, who sets in train which actions. And can we track the emergent properties of the rituals over time? The result is a modest yet robust anthropology, knowingly incomplete and therefore more honest.

As noted above, Mambila traditional religion also involves mundane ritual actions that occur sporadically throughout the year. These include not only the *sùàgà* oaths and the divination that often precedes them, but also a set (not a system) of taboos (*julu*), blessing ceremonies (*damà*), and funerary rites. Some of these (*kubu fuo*) have variations in timing which are attributed to the various origins of Mambila subgroups (Zeitlyn and Connell [2003] give a fractal account of these subgroup histories). Another important religious activity is the ritual following the birth of twins. I now see these rites as particularly significant because they are the only occasions when the three main ritual groups meet outside of the main ritual cycle: The parents of newborn twins are blessed by women's *sùàgà*, and for three mornings after this, a small part of the *Ngwun* war dance is performed in front of their house. This is explained as being appropriate because the parents of twins resemble chiefs in their potency. Although elements of *Ngwun* are performed, the *mgbe lə* are not involved: Their advice is not needed because everyone knows the dance and songs concerned. On the evening of the third day, men's

sùàgà is danced, and the twins are named by a member of men's *sùàgà*, himself a father of twins. Later (when enough maize is available for the beer associated with the festivities), another rite is performed (also by a twin-fathering member of men's *sùàgà*), during which two acacia trees (*bɔ*) are planted outside the house of the twins' mother. These demonstrate that twins live there, but that fact is not marked by any other ritual, and nothing is done if the trees die; nor is there any special ritual if one or both twins die.

When considering how Mambila traditional religion functioned 50 or more years ago, a series of agricultural calendrical rituals is also noteworthy. These marked different phases of the agricultural year. They were controlled by the village chief, lending him a prominence which has since been lost. Since maize replaced sorghum as the staple crop (broadly, over the 50 years following 1920), those agricultural rituals have more or less vanished.

The anthropological challenge is how to put fragments of ethnography together in ways that Mambila (and other) readers can understand. This is achievable by minimizing the theology and systematicity while pointing to the overlaps and features of organization (resolving Galison's "coordination problems"). This returns me to the themes of my doctorate and subsequent publications (e.g., 1993, 1994). Here it suffices to say that the *suàgà* oaths invoke the power of the masquerades and of the chief (who, with his sisters and wives, is central to both masquerades). So chiefship, masking, and oath-taking have (largely unarticulated) conceptual connections. The rituals were and still are coordinated by the chief in consultation with seniors and timed according to the seasons (rainy season/dry season), the traditional 10-day calendar, and (for *Ngwun*) the phase of the moon. Once dates are fixed, the villagers can prepare for the visitors who attend major ceremonies.

This points to a conceptual integration: a pattern of connections between royal ritual and ritual associated with the calendrical and agricultural cycle, which is not found in contemporary Mambila religion. Was there ever a time when one could not claim that religion used to be more neatly organized until some foreign elements were introduced, which messed it all up? This theme is familiar in much of West Africa. One person, the chief, stands at the center of both political structures and the religious system. The main Mambila ritual/religious nexus is fairly easy to summarize (as I have just done). Beyond its central nodes is a vast panoply of more or less disconnected religious activities, into which Islam and Christianity fitted easily.

11 | Conclusions

Galison suggests that we should be even more assertive in providing parsimonious accounts. As we have learned, it is not easy to produce a comparative anthropology that treats equally people's different ways of living and of understanding the world. The trading zone model, in which different groups/subgroups work together over the *longue durée* without necessarily agreeing on a semantic basis for their common cause, is both robust and modest in its assumptions. It is a good starting place for the anthropological project: a scaffolding of thin descriptions supporting a wide variety of structures, some of which may be amplified by thick descriptions and ethnographic vignettes.

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Endnotes

¹ Curl Essay Prize winner 2023.

² This has been extensively discussed elsewhere. See for example, Gorman's (2010) edited collection and Collins et al. (2007).

³ In correspondence John Jackson identifies the risk that a different sort of conceptual baggage is being smuggled in: an assumption that economics (trade) is fundamental. So Graeber (2001) argues against equating "value" with "economic value." Recognizing this, we must be wary and strive to reduce the weight of the carry-on conceptual baggage.

⁴ If these seem implausible, consider Tim Ingold (2008, 215) addressing Bruno Latour in print: "I cannot, for the most part, understand a word of what you say." I assume that Ingold does not suffer from aphasia and is talking metaphorically. Or have I failed to understand him?

⁵ Pina-Cabral's (2013, 2020) response is to use Donald Davidson's principle of "interpretive charity" to justify a form of creative indeterminacy, one which assumes that various forms of vagueness are pervasive. Povinelli's (2001, 332) discussion of Davidson and incommensurability also notes that "Charity begins at home" and that "indeterminacy/undecidability is the normal condition of communication."

⁶ This could also be called "socially distanced trade." The key idea is that the parties manage to negotiate transactions without ever being copresent.

⁷ A paradigmatic example of *angry science* point-scoring is Mitchell Duneier's (2002) response to a hostile review: "What Kind of Combat Sport Is Sociology?."

⁸ The key idea is that these objects can be discussed by different groups who understand them very differently. See Star (1989), discussed below.

⁹ Thompson (2007) gives a detailed introduction to these ideas and how they remain separate but are closely interconnected.

¹⁰ The irreducible emergent status of social features has been discussed in the critical realist literature by Roy Bhaskar (1978, 113, [1979] 2005, 41ff). See Kaidesoja's (2009) discussion and the work of Mario Bunge and William Wimsatt.

¹¹ As has Niklas Luhmann (1982, 131; 1995, 66–67), although he uses autopoiesis to discuss meaningful communication, and how stable, intersubjective meanings are generated "autopoietically."

¹² This statement is contentious, resembling arguments about whether transgender people can change sex. I will not address these here, but acknowledge the complexity and controversy around such statements. My point concerns the tense of the statement, and the contentious complexity of what "being born as an X" can be taken to mean by different factions.

¹³ "Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they make it under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past": <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm> (accessed 27 November 2011). Fn3 p 77. Durkheim ([1895] 1964, 3) adopts a similar position when discussing constraints.

¹⁴ They were writing against the behaviorism then dominant in psychology (Porter 2012).

- ¹⁵William Wimsatt and colleagues (Caporael et al. 2014) have used the idea of scaffolding to discuss individual development and social reproduction. My use of “scaffolding” is neutral as to whether “generative entrenchment” has occurred (Wimsatt 2014). Entrenchment is the way that temporary scaffolds become part of the permanent armature or skeleton of an organism (biological or social).
- ¹⁶This is also Geoffroy Lloyd’s (2021, 3) position after comparing ancient Greek and ancient Chinese thought: we can carefully inch ourselves into a provisional understanding of how different others went about their business (my words not his).
- ¹⁷Jackson (2013, 13) does not provide the “raw and baseline empiricism, the necessary starting point for social investigation but not nearly enough all by itself” that he says is thin description.
- ¹⁸“Usually” does a lot of work here: For example, many accounts of disputes about population sizes and territorial boundaries are thin₁ descriptions. Dan-Cohen (2020) has discussed the politics in distinctions between simple and complex accounts that can easily but misleadingly be mapped onto the distinctions between thin and thick descriptions.
- ¹⁹Alternative thin descriptions may exist. For example, in sociolinguistics, radical “deconstructivists” argue that the idea of “a language” as a discrete entity is theoretically unsupportable so should not be used. Holmes’s (2024) admirably clear review (of a collection challenging the deconstructivist program) summarizes the arguments. The choice of an analytic vocabulary (a theoretical framework) sets the scene for thick descriptions. Other vocabularies or frameworks are possible.
- ²⁰In thin₁ summary, Mambila people are found in Nigeria and Cameroon. The total population is not known with any accuracy but is in the region of 100,000. My research has concentrated on the village of Somié in Cameroon which in 2022 had a population of about 2500 people, mainly peasant farmers. Most identify as either Christian or Muslim but also continue to practice traditional religion. (Zeitlyn [2025] discusses new forms of purist exclusivity.)

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