

**The Use of Omens,
Magic and Sorcery for
Power and Hunting**

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Introduction

Early man can, perhaps, be called fully human only from the moment he developed his capacity for symbolic and analogical thought. That the mind is 'programmed' to make associations is easily demonstrated by the simple Rorschach test. Anyone unable to discern patterns in a random set of ink blots would be considered abnormal.

This capacity has immense practical application. It gave stone-age man a basic survival edge, allowing a more flexible approach to a wide range of problems. It helped him create more sophisticated tools and think out more imaginative hunting strategies. However, this very capacity to look beyond the tangible world, to seek out invisible connections and relationships between things and to spot the essential quality that unified them very quickly bore fruit in another way. Early man soon developed a system of 'magical' thinking and sought to apply it to improve his lot. Thus, at the very birth of human history, magic and technology went hand in hand.

The laws of magic rest on the principle that a 'bridge' may be built between objects or actions which resemble each other – and that this bridge may form a sort of conduit for the human will. As such, it has been called by some the application of 'false' associations; by others a by-product of what appears to be an analogical capacity of the mind. The legacy of this form of thought is with us today. If you are the passenger of a car hurtling towards a wall at a hundred and twenty miles per hour, no sooner has the wish crossed your mind that the driver would slow down, than your foot, almost of its own accord, may apply itself to an imaginary brake. Logic tells you that your foot is not connected to a brake at all. But your action has nothing to do with logic. It resembles much more closely the rules of magic – which state that like may influence like. Hence, in magical terms it makes perfect sense that mimicking the action of braking may help to bring about the slowing of the car.

There is abundant archaeological and anthropological evidence to suggest that this concept stretches back in an unbroken chain to the dawn of mankind. Once the idea of magic was born, almost as night follows day, a system of magical practice followed. Throughout his history, man has created more and more elaborate rules for operating and rationalising a magical mechanism which must, from the first, have produced continual disappointments.

Yet the idea of magic has never died out; indeed some of the more virulent opposition by religious and scientific establishments merely serves to underline its very tenacity.

What are the principles upon which magic depends? How was it put to use in the earliest human societies? And what, if any, residues remain in our own lives?

Principles of Magic

A belief in magic may be said to be a belief that there is an invisible force or forces, which govern nature and which obey a series of rules. Magic resembles science, in that the magician assumes he can make use of these forces in a set manner, irrespective of whether he intends to exert them for good or for evil. So, rather like the force of, say, electricity, magic will react constantly under given conditions. And, as with electricity, whether it is put to use to run a life support machine or to electrocute somebody will not alter by one iota the behaviour of the force itself.

It has been observed that religious thinking seeks to become worthy of something – magical thinking tries for an effect. The fundamental assumptions of magic – that there may be more to the world than we can immediately perceive and that mankind may harness even what he cannot see – form part of the bedrock of our civilisation today. Indeed, modern science owes an enormous debt to the efforts of the magical pioneers, who sought to find out more about the world about them, through what amounted to a series of experiments.

The principles upon which magic is said to operate have remained remarkably stable since prehistoric man first daubed the walls of his cave with depictions of the prey he wished to kill. The most basic form, often known as *sympathetic* magic, looks for associations between things. One factor that emerges again and again is the idea that objects we see around us are linked by a kind of invisible network of connections, which may in turn have links to other unseen dimensions.

When such a connection is established or recognised, an immense power lies in the hands of the magical practitioner: he may exert an influence on one object or action by means of another. These may be two things that can be made or seen to resemble one another: like the outline of the prey on the cave wall which mimics the animals themselves. It may be something that has been in contact with the object upon which one wishes to exert an influence. That is why, for a reinforcing effect, voodoo wax dolls in the image of an enemy may also contain nail-parings or a lock of the victim's hair. It may involve a ceremony intended to link the two; such as 'christening' the doll with the victim's own name. Or it may simply be effected by producing a channel for an effort of mental concentration – like the aboriginal 'pointing' stick.

Once established, like an electrical circuit, the connection permits the 'spark' of human will to 'jump the gap'. The intense desire of the magical operator is an intrinsic part of the operation. The formula has any number of applications. One interesting aboriginal version, quoted in Spencer's 'The Northern Tribes of Central Australia', runs thus:

'If a man has had intercourse unlawfully with a woman, and without the latter being a consenting party, she will tell her husband, and acting under his instructions will make a pointing-bone out of the fibula of a wallaby, sharpening it at one end. She carries this about with her as she hunts for food in the bush, "singing" it all the time. When it has thus been endowed with arungquiltha (evil magic), she places it in some spot where the man whom she desires to injure is likely to micturate. Should he or anything belonging to him come into contact with the bone, then at once the evil magic enters into him, with the result that his penis decays and drops off.'

Thus, she has created a convenient 'time bomb' – when the victim, or something associated with him, physically touches the magically-charged bone, the 'connection' is formed, which instantly puts the spell into operation.

The role of magic as a kind of magnifier of human willpower is stressed in a spell from the nineteenth century magician, Francis Barrett:

'If anyone, with an entire new knife, should cut asunder a lemon, using words expressive of hatred, contumely or dislike against any individual, the absent party though at an unlimited distance feels a certain inexpressible and cutting anguish of the heart, together with

a cold chilliness and failure throughout the body.’¹

Here, magical association (of the lemon with the heart of the victim) enables the magician’s destructive thoughts to traverse physical boundaries – in this case, distance.

It may then be seen from the above that magic is concerned with breaking through the arbitrary physical restrictions that mankind encounters, of finding ‘another way’, linked with joining powers of the human mind with outside forces. Once this idea had occurred to early man – which it did almost from the start of his history – he put it to use in trying to obtain those ends that most preoccupied him: success in hunting, and for power and protection.

Stone Age Magic

It is then hardly surprising that ensuring the success of the hunt was probably the first use of magic. This was at a period of human history so early that it predated agriculture by many thousands of years.

The earliest art of the Stone Age comprises images that are difficult to reconcile with mere decoration. The vast majority of the naturalistic paintings are placed in the most inaccessible spots; suggesting that they were done for some mysterious yet important purpose, far away from the ordinary living areas of the caves. Furthermore, there is little or no attempt at grouping individual animals; to depict a hunting scene, for example. Animals were drawn to different scales, at different times and were simply drawn over – as though they were no longer needed once their purpose had been fulfilled.

In many caves, such as Niaux in the Pyrenees, some of the bison have arrows in their sides. All the signs are that these are important integral parts of the paintings: in some cases, the beasts have been drawn to fit round natural holes in the walls – these holes are then used to represent mortal wounds. These suggest a pure use of magical tradition; the desired effect of shot animals being enacted first on the cave walls.

Notably, however perfectly the animals are drawn, the human figures are almost uniformly poor. It could be that it was simply regarded as too magically dangerous to make close images of human beings, lest harm should befall them. Or there may have been no need to do so, when the animal, rather than the person was the subject to be worked upon.

That there was considered to be a powerful identity between an object and its image is hinted at by the reluctance of the ancient Egyptians – a much later and more sophisticated people – to put a complete hieroglyph of any animal into a tomb, in case the symbol came to life, and simply became the object it depicted. To this day, many ‘primitive’ people are reluctant to have their photograph taken, as the image is believed to steal something of the ‘essence’ of the original.

The living ideas and practices that accompanied the stone-age cave images may only be guessed at. But it seems from some of the traces they left behind in their caves – indentations which could have been made by the feet of dancers, hundreds of hand prints in red ochre on cave walls, some with missing finger joints, pictures of men masked with animal heads – that they had already constructed an elaborate system of magical belief and ritual.

At the very least, there seems little doubt that we may view stone-age cave art as an attempt to create an association between the hunter, the weapon and the prey in order to further magical ends, and possibly to ensure the restocking of supplies for the seasons to come. As such, it would seem that the basis for magical practices used by hunter-gatherer societies all over the world had already been laid thirty thousand years ago.

Sympathy Between the Hunter and Hunted

So, what of modern or recent hunter-gatherer societies? Do their everyday lives accord with the same rules and practices?

They do, and they go even further, giving us a glimpse of the magical relationship between the hunter and the animals he hunts. This relationship forms the basis for a mental concentration on the part of the hunter upon his prey that permeates his very existence. The hunters of the South African bush, for example, believe the link is never stronger than when the hunter has actually touched and wounded the prey. From that moment on, the hunter and hunted are to all magical intents and purposes one. Anything the hunter does will have a bearing on the fate of the animal he has wounded, even if the unfortunate beast has escaped into the forest. It is now that the hunter must take the most elaborate precautions to prevent his prey from recovering; if he plays his role correctly, the animal’s doom is sealed as surely as if they were bound together in an invisible net.

A local folktale, retold by Dorothea Bleek, makes this clear:

‘When a man has shot an eland he does not come home. He walks about as if he were ill; people carry him away as if he were ill, for he wants the eland to act as he does. Therefore he does not come home, lest he come to a place where the children are screaming. He comes to a place which is windward, so that he may not smell the food the people are cooking at home. For if the eland were to smell the food, it would arise and go away; and it would smell the food if the man who shot it also smelled it.’

Another ‘stone-age’ people of hunter-gatherers, the Aleuts, have almost identical beliefs, as described by Frazer in ‘The Golden Bough’:

‘. . . Among the Aleuts of Alaska the hunter who had struck a whale with a charmed spear would not throw again, but returned at once to his home and separated himself from his people in a hut specially constructed for the purpose, where he stayed for three days without food or drink, and without touching or looking upon a woman. During this time of seclusion he snorted occasionally in imitation of the wounded and dying whale, in order to prevent the whale which he had struck from leaving the coast. On the fourth day he emerged from his seclusion and bathed in the sea, shrieking in a hoarse voice and beating the water with his hands. Then, taking with him a companion, he repaired to that part of the shore where he expected to find the whale stranded. If the beast was dead, he at once cut out the place where the death-wound had been inflicted. If the whale was not dead, he again returned to his home and continued washing himself until the whale died.’

The Mbuti Pygmy people regard not just the animal kingdom, but the forest in which they live as a living entity. In sickness, the people have cuts made and earth from the forest rubbed in, to capture some of its essence. Parents of a baby that is still crawling, and is therefore regarded to be in an animal condition, are prohibited from eating meat themselves, for it would be like eating the flesh of their baby’s brothers and sisters.²

Raising the Stakes – Creating Emotional Conditions

Another factor which arises again and again in magical practices is the emotional environment in which results are said to be achieved. From the earliest stone-age meeting to the modern-day magician, all go to elaborate lengths to create conditions where heightened emotions will obtain – or be thought to have obtained –

a result. This is one of the major areas in which magical practice differs from what we describe today as the scientific method.

Apparently in common with their stone-age counterparts, modern hunter-gatherers often have to undergo frightening or painful processes, which will, however, magically improve their capacity to hunt. Among the !Kung San people, when a man has killed his first buck (and for the first kill of each sex, male and female) he goes through a ritual which outwardly serves as an initiation as a hunter. However, its emotional pitch and a certain amount of pain reinforces its magical impact. The initiation is designed to magically increase the future potential of the lad as a hunter. Cuts are made in his breastbone, back, arm, face and in his chest over his heart. 'Medicine' containing fat from the first kill is rubbed into them.

In Richard Lee's book on the !Kung San³, the medicine man explains the motives:

'I cut his chest and put in medicine to lift up his heart and make him want to seek meat; I put it in his arm and wrist to make his arm soft and his aim correct; in his back to make sure that the game won't run away; in his brow so that he may see things quickly.'

In 'The Melanesians', R.H. Codrington gives a powerful description of a projective magical technique, so frightening that its efficacy is scarcely in doubt, quite independently of any magical effect. On Bank's Islands, an object known as the Tamatetiqa, or ghost-shooter, a piece of bamboo filled with leaves and the bones of a dead man, is considered to be a powerful magical tool.

Charms are said over it, then the operator holds it, being careful to cover its open end, until he sees his enemy. He then has merely to aim and uncover the end for the magic to 'shoot' the victim, who will, of course, drop dead on the spot.

A certain man bruted about that he was going to fire off a ghost-shooter, but refused to divulge his target. To add to the potency of the spell, he fasted until he could no longer walk. At length, on the occasion of a great feast, the magical operator was carried to the scene of the festivities. Codrington describes the scene:⁴

'All the men there knew that there was one of them he meant to shoot; no one knew whether it was himself. There he sat as the dancers rapidly passed him circling round, a fearful object, black with dirt and wasted to a skeleton with fasting, his tamatetiqa within

his closed fingers stopped with his thumb, his trembling arm stretched out, and his bleared eyes watching for his enemy. Every man trembled inwardly as he danced by him and the attention of the whole crowd was fixed on him. After a while, bewildered and dazed with his own weakness, the rapid movements of the dancers and the noise, he mistook his man; he raised his arm and lifted his thumb. The man he aimed at fell at once upon the ground and the dancers stopped. Then he saw that he had failed, and that the wrong man was hit, and his distress was great; but the man who had fallen and was ready to expire, when he was made to understand that no harm was meant him, took courage again to live, and presently revived. No doubt he would have died if the mistake had not been known.'

Lest we dismiss such scenes as the province of mere 'primitive' peoples, let us examine at least one example of a not dissimilar practice extant in Europe well into the nineteenth century and which could conceivably survive to the present day. According to Frazer, many French peasants believed that evil priests could compel God to grant whatever was asked with a sufficiently magical rendering of a mass of the Holy Spirit. The drama and magical content of this mass lie in the emotionally-charged atmosphere in which religious ritual is mimicked:⁵

'The mass of St Secaire may be said only in a ruined or deserted church, where owls mope and hoot, where bats flit in the gloaming, where gypsies lodge of nights, and where toads squat under the desecrated altar. Thither the bad priest comes by night . . . the host he blesses is black and has three points; he consecrates no wine, but instead he drinks the water of a well into which the body of an unbaptized infant has been flung. He makes the sign of the Cross, but it is on the ground and with his left foot . . .'

Not surprisingly, the person for whom this frightful mass is said withers away and dies in a very short time indeed.

Much of the efficacy of this sort of spell can be explained by the power of auto-suggestion. In formulating his theories of conditioned responses, Pavlov experimented with the effects of increased stress on suggestibility. He found that creating an environment of stressful expectation, by delaying the feeding of a dog after the signal to which he had been conditioned to expect to receive it, eventually provoked breakdown, which overrode the pre-conditioned responses. This breakdown was accompanied by a state of hyper-suggestibility. Dogs in poor physical condition, or in a state of fear, were similarly affected.

In his book, 'Battle for the Mind', the physiologist William Sargant deals with these well-documented physiological effects in the context of political indoctrination and religious conversion. His conclusion could just as easily apply to the power which a great deal of magic exerts over its practitioners and victims alike:

'The subject may first have to have his emotions worked upon until he reaches an abnormal condition of anger, fear or exaltation. If this condition is maintained or intensified by one means or another, hysteria may supervene, whereupon the subject can become more open to suggestions which in normal circumstances he would have summarily rejected.'

However, magic takes things a step further, implicitly accepting that there is a special power of the mind, heightened under emotionally-charged conditions, which may be harnessed.

One example, from Japan, of an attempt to capture this force is given in Idries Shah's 'Oriental Magic':

'A hungry dog (dogs are believed to have some special occult significance) is tied up within sight of food. The emotion of hunger is brought to a fine pitch by changing the meal for one more appetising. When this feeling has been thus "concentrated", the animal's head is chopped off. It is then thought to contain the essence of concentration.'

In most cases, this emotional concentration is supplied by the mind of the magical operator. As such, however, his emotional state forms part of the operation – he must seek involvement, rather than the detachment prized by scientists.

Development of Charms and Spells

Magical practices which may have begun in a spirit of experimentation to improve the hunt – rather as one would try out a new tool – soon found a wide application elsewhere. The people of the South African Bush use a variety of 'hunting' magic for courtship to 'hunt' a bride, constructing a tiny bow and arrow and shooting their loved one with it. This does, at the very least, have the advantage of making their feelings perfectly clear.

When charms and spells from different ages and localities are considered side by side, some of their common characteristics may be observed. The so-called magic songs of the West Finns – collected during the 18th and 19th centuries from an oral stock many centuries older – contain classical hunting charms from a

European hunter-gatherer tradition. This one, quoted in the Honourable John Abercromby's 'The Pre-and Proto-Historic Finns' uses psychology and cunning to entice hares onto a snare:

'Approach without anxiety, without precaution play about, strike on the threshold with thy nail, with thy paw the front of the trap . . . bite the nearest trigger pin, with forest-honey it is smeared, with woodland-sweetness is bedaubed.

'On no account approach other people's trigger-pins: there death would seize thee in its mouth, a dreadful death encounter thee. All other triggers are malign, which thou shouldst be on thy guard against, but this is a honeyed trigger-pin, which has been set with its upper end, placed with its upper end in snow, with its lower end to the sky inclined; the top end holds a pair of tong, the lower end tight strains a bow.'

And, in the same book, an extremely primitive Mordvin charm illustrates the roots of some spells in little more than 'positive thinking'. It attempts to reinforce the effect of a herb, by bullying tactics:

'Tartar plant, the thunder-nettle! I have come to you as a guest. Sergei's cow has got the worms. In case you don't get rid of them I shall visit you again. Now I shall only tear off your top, but I shall come again, should you not get rid of them, and tear you up by the root, I shall even dry up your roots.'

This kind of thinking is one stage ahead of our impulse to hit the stone we have just banged our toe against. Both attribute human values to the object in question, but the charm attempts to channel human willpower into using this knowledge for profit, rather than punishment.

At the race course today, we may likewise focus the full power of our will on a given result – this is magical thinking, for science will not, at the present time, admit that our mere thoughts (however galvanised by the prospect of financial ruin) can, in fact, have any effect.

The only difference is that, had we lived in the Ancient World, we might have preferred to reinforce and channel that same emotion by means of a written spell, like this one, inscribed on lead, and intended to hamper the wrong team of charioteers in Carthage, in North Africa:⁶

‘Bind their hands. Take away their victory, their exit, their sight, so that they are unable to see their rival charioteers, but rather snatch them up from their chariots and twist them to the ground so that they alone fall, dragged along all over the hippodrome, especially at the turning points, with damage to their body, with the horses whom they drive. Now quickly.’

Alternatively, if a positive effect were desired, the same principle was applied – as this spell from an Egyptian tablet illustrates:⁷

‘If you wish to race horses, even when they are exhausted, so that they will not stumble in their running . . . take a silver lamella and write upon it the names of the horses, and the names of the angels . . . and say:

“I adjure you angels of running, who run amid the stars, that you will gird with strength and courage the horses that N is racing and his charioteer who is racing them. Let them run and not become weary nor stumble. Let them run and be swift as an eagle. Let no animals stand before them, and let no other magic or witchcraft affect them . . .”

Another example from ancient Egypt clearly applies the principles of sympathetic magic discussed above. Clay pots have been found, dating from the nineteenth century before Christ, inscribed with the names of enemies. These pots were then smashed ‘so that the power of the enemy should be smashed likewise’.

There is a tradition of the Prophet Mohammed that his life was saved after a warning by the archangel Gabriel led to the discovery of a death spell. It consisted of a piece of string, into which nine knots were tied, each one ‘binding’ a curse. When the knots were undone, the curse was lifted. All over Europe, witches were regularly accused of such practices:

‘Witches do likewise torment mankind, by making images of clay or wax and when the witches prick or pounce these images, the persons whom these images represent, do find extreme torment, which doth not proceed from any influences upon the body tormented, but the evil doth by natural means raise these torments in the person tormented, at the same very time that the witches do prick or pounce, or hold to the fire these images of clay or wax.’⁸

It was a risky business; by casting such a spell, the witch had created a mysterious link between herself and her victim, which, if

the spell was discovered, could be used to trace the trail back to her. A witch's spell, if found, should be immediately thrown into the fire. It would then compel the witch herself to enter the room, under some pretext, and thus her identity could be discovered. If the spell could not be found, the victim's own magical proximity to the witch could be exploited.

In the seventeenth century, many a 'witch bottle' was made aimed at throwing the spell back upon the witch. They typically contained some of the victim's urine and a collection of material usually including nail clippings, iron nails, a felt heart and so on. These bottles were often buried or thrown into the river. Another version was to boil up a similar mixture, causing untold agony to the witch – if the stopper exploded off the bottle, its effectiveness was particularly marked. At other times, magic gained an array of accretions – incorporating spirits and deities, the trimmings of religion, animism, ritual and whatever else came to hand. But, despite the complexity and variety of some of it, magical practice builds on the fundamentals that have been discussed here.

Averting the Eye – Talismans and Amulets

One residue of magical thinking that has featured virtually universally in some form or other since the dawn of human society is a belief in the power of 'The Evil Eye'. The Romans called it *fascinum* (from which we derive the word fascination). In Arabic *al-Nazar* – the Glance – closely mirrors our contemporary European concept.

The Evil Eye is generally held to be the product of a kind of destructive force of malice and envy – which may be channelled by a glance on the part of the envier. It underlines a very basic belief in a destructive power of the mind which may be unleashed even inadvertently. It may, perhaps, be a survival of a much earlier climate of belief, resembling that of some hunter-gatherer societies today, who hold that we are enveloped by a network of natural magical forces of various kinds.

The belief in the Evil Eye – although certainly predating the world's major religions – has in no way been mitigated by them. Sura 113 of the Quran implicitly accepts the destructive force of the envier's Eye:

‘Say thou: “I take refuge in the Lord of Daybreak
From the Evil of all He hath created,

From the evil of the darkness when it spreads,
From the evil of those who blow upon knots (witches)
And from the evil of the envier when he envies.””

In Arab – and most Moslem – countries, a new-born baby or other object which may be the cause of envy is therefore not admired too greatly by others, and their praise is always tempered with the phrase ‘mashallah’, ‘whatever God wills’, to deflect the Evil Eye.

In various cultures, different classes of people may be said to carry the Eye. Many Arabs believe pregnant women to be potent carriers, in central Asia and Italy squinters are the culprits, while the Armenians go so far as to claim that everyone with blue or green eyes possesses its power. Where religion holds sway, belief in the Evil Eye merely borrows its garb; in many parts of the world, it is believed that certain priests possess the power.

In Corsica, the Eye, *L’Occhiu* may strike people or farm animals, causing them to waste away. It is caused by the malevolent influence of an envious person. The writer, Dorothy Carrington, documents one elaborate rite in Corsica where a Signadore, a kind of wise woman, uses Christian symbolism to combat the Eye. She makes the sign of a cross three times with her right hand over cold water in a white soup plate. Then she drops three drops of hot olive oil with the little finger of her left hand into the water. Sometimes the plate is held over the head of the sufferer.⁹

Other cultures have spent millennia designing and employing amulets to counter this menace. The Saxons believed implicitly in the power of the cowrie shell, which has been found in burial sites since prehistoric days. In an interesting reversal of the laws of sympathetic magic, the colour blue and amulets in the shape of an eye are to this day considered potent deflectors of the Eye in many parts of the world. Iron has healing as well as preventative properties. Salt may be passed over a sufferer or sprinkled over the threshold and in the four corners of a room.

Pliny advocated that a living bat should be carried round the house, and finally nailed to a window with its head downwards. He also suggested that amber should be tied to a delicate child to protect it from malevolent influences.

Psychologically speaking, amulets may be seen as a solution which operates on the same level as the problem. The problem may be witchcraft, or harmful magical forces. The solution, the amulet,

acts rather like the father who gave his little boy a picture of a gun to cure his nightmares, so that he could shoot the monsters with it in his dreams. It offers an instrument which can tackle evil spells on their own plane.

Today we may scoff at such precautions. Yet, especially when our emotions are roused, we often act in similar ways. Taking a ‘mascot’ into an examination implies a belief in the efficacy of an object to influence events. Keeping a horseshoe about the house does so as well, notwithstanding the protestation of one eminent scientist who nailed one above his door, saying: ‘I understand it works whether you believe in it or not.’

There is evidence that the use of amulets and talismans in some form is as old as humanity itself. Stone-age ‘amulets’ have been found carved on bone. They are naturalistic representations of specific animals, sometimes pierced, as though they were worn. Since it seems unlikely that experienced hunters would need ‘reminding’ of what their prey looked like, the carvings appear to be linked to magical beliefs aimed at improving the hunt. The stone-age ‘amulets’ are uncannily similar to this description by Ivar Lissner of the Tungu people of Siberia and Northern Manchuria:¹⁰

‘The Tungus used to carve a figure of the animal which they wished to kill and take it with them on hunting trips, on the principle that if the pictorial soul is in the hunter’s possession, the animal itself will soon follow.’

From these humble beginnings, virtually everybody has or understands some form of amulet: from the Muslim ‘Hand of Fatima’ to the Christian ‘St Christopher’, to the ‘lucky shirt’ of the football player. So powerful is the faith that certain types of object can ward off harm or promote good, that overtly religious symbols – such as the crucifix – have been co-opted into the fray and used as talismans.

Amulets were called by Bede ‘the false remedies of idolatry’¹¹. But, as the Catholic Church’s own dealings in relics and indulgences illustrate, however religion may chafe at magical thinking, it is not immune from it.

Omens

No less a personage than Socrates, considered to be the pioneer of logical thinking, based much of his decision-making behaviour upon omens. Whenever one of his friends sneezed towards the left,

it was a sign that he should not pursue a course of action, if on the right, then the signs were favourable. He believed in a 'guardian angel', a kind of intuition, and maintained that omens were merely signs sent by a higher power – the form of the signs was trivial, but the power was worthy of respect. This conviction that the answers to what may seem like insoluble problems are available, if we can but read them correctly, is mirrored by almost every ancient or 'primitive' society.

Like many peoples, Hindus derive omens from animals. If a traveller sees dog scratching its right side with its right leg, for example, that is a good omen. But if it is scratching its left side, with its left leg, the portent is adverse.¹² Travellers should delay their journey if they see bulls, donkeys or cats fighting. If a hawk flies over a traveller, that is a good omen – but if a pig or snake cross his path he should go backwards for 200 yards before continuing his journey.

Both the Celts and Scandinavians used to consult natural omens, like the movement of clouds or flames, to decide their course of action. Young warriors were taught how to understand omens of the birds as part of their military training. There is a ninth-century account of an occasion when a town in Sweden, which had no means of protecting itself, was delivered from a Viking onslaught because the Vikings, having cast lots, were advised by the oracle to abandon their plan of attack.¹³

That type of behaviour was by no means limited to the Vikings. According to the Greek scholar Polyaeus, the entire Athenian army refused to go into battle because someone sneezed.

And there are still large numbers of societies today which base many of their actions and decisions upon omens. For example, the Azande people of Central Africa display an absolute belief in the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world. One nineteenth century observer noted that, for really important decisions, they consult the poison oracle:¹⁴

'Their mode of consulting this oracle (benge) is as follows; the chief perhaps desires to know if a certain road is safe for him to travel by on the morrow. Accordingly, he selects two young fowls . . . by means of a feather, an equal quantity of the poison, a red composition, made by mixing water with the scraped bark of a certain root (strychnos ichaja), is put into each chicken's throat. Then the man who is invoking the oracle makes an incantation

somewhat to the following effect: “Benge, tell me, tell me true! If this one die and this one live the road is safe.” Then he talks to fowls. “You die and you live,” he says. If the result is contrary to his desire then he postpones his project or takes another path.’

After years of maintaining a lofty superiority to such practices, in recent times it has become fashionable for anthropologists and others to point out possible advantages. The custom of Labrador Indians, for example, of using divination to choose hunting routes at times when game is scarce, has come under examination¹⁵.

Anthropologists have concluded that the ‘randomising’ process thus introduced (the Indians follow routes suggested by a haphazard pattern of cracks in heated bones, rather than their customary trails) prevents the over-use of certain hunting paths at periods of particular strain on resources and is thus an aid to survival.

How does it work?

In ancient times, there was no distinction between magical or other nefarious ways of exerting one’s will over one’s enemy. For instance, the word *pharmaka* was used by Ionian Greeks of the fifth century BC to describe both poisonous potions and spells and curses. Disseminating either was punishable with death. In modern times, in many primitive societies, the local witchdoctor will have at his or her disposal a range of methods – if magic does not work, then poison is seen as a logical next step.

Needless to say, in ancient times there were no means of scientific verification and comparison of the success of these methods. Today, there has been scarcely any more serious research into the comparative efficacy of magical and more conventional means. However, modern students are, nevertheless, reassessing their assumptions that magic simply *can’t* work.

In his introduction to ‘Curse Tablets and Binding Spells of the Ancient World’, John Gager is typical of this soul-searching when he asks:

‘What would happen . . . if we . . . began with the idea that these beliefs and practices must have worked in some sense; if we indicated that we can no longer accept the notion that those who hold to them are irrational?’

And Richard Furnald Smith, in ‘Prelude to Science’, discovers what the supposed ‘savages’ have known all along:

‘... primitive magic may actually “work”. It may have undergone a kind of natural selection and have survival value for its users.’

To support his case, he goes on to cite an example from the Mentawai Islands, where the local medicine man instructs those suffering from diarrhoea to lick the cliffs, which, it turns out, are made of kaolin.

Most modern observers have, however, concentrated on the social and psychological benefits – relief of tension, transfer of emotions, saving face and so on – that institutionalised magic may provide. In addition to this, even leaving aside the claims of the practitioners themselves, we may at least suggest there could be additional factors – like the kaolin content in the cliffs – which are rarely considered by outside observers. For example, in his ‘Psychology of Superstition’, Gustav Jahoda recalls the advice to pregnant women in Victorian times to visit art galleries so their babies might grow up to be cultured. Now this is very close to sympathetic magic and resembles a whole slew of taboos upon the activities of pregnant women still prevalent in many parts of the world. It was unreservedly ridiculed in the twentieth century – until modern psychologists began to learn that stress suffered by the mother during pregnancy may adversely influence foetal development.

It may be noted that here it is the *presentation* of essentially the same information which determines its acceptance or rejection: the medicine man’s ‘magic’ in one place; the reassurance of ‘scientific studies’ in another.

In smiling at the quaintness of much of what is presented as ‘magic’, or even searching for social benefits, we may be missing the point. The possibility that we – and the world around us – can be influenced by the power of our minds to a greater degree than we imagine is still largely unexplored. When we pick ‘lucky’ lottery numbers or will on our favourite team, at least a part of us admits we believe that this is so.

Easier, perhaps, to pin down, are the ‘spin offs’ of magic, which often requires a certain mental exertion on the part of the operator. John Napier, the mathematician, invented logarithms to help him work out the exact date of the end of the world, as predicted in the Bible. Isaac Newton said he went to Cambridge to try to discover what truth there was in astrology.

One of the great advantages of ‘magical thinking’ at its best is

that it challenges us to push forward the boundaries, to aim for a result. Science today may need to be more scientific; to examine what it has shied away from examining, to discover, as far as possible with scientific methods, what may or may not lie behind patterns of thought which, on some level or other, are shared by almost everyone on the globe.

Conclusion

From the most convoluted magical ritual, to the stream of magical thinking which survives in our own lives, all follow the same underlying current. That current has flowed unbroken from the days our stone-age ancestors first daubed their cave walls with the images of the animals they wished to catch.

Magic offers advantages and benefits on many levels. Without hazarding any opinion on the validity of its tenets, at its crudest magical thinking opens the mind to the possibility of factors beyond the everyday world. Importantly, it also introduces the idea that we may do something about that which we do not wholly understand, to break through barriers, to 'find out'. As such, it is a valuable precursor to science.

However, as with all patterns of human thought, there is a point at which what began as a survival advantage may outlive its usefulness. If one is in the grip of constant superstition, or fear of unseen 'magical' forces, or witchcraft or malignant spells, one will no longer be able to operate at an optimum level.

To gain benefit from, say, omens for hunting, the group must, as the price of admission, invest in a certain degree of belief. Yet, if this belief becomes too central, their lives may be entirely trammelled in a series of ritualistic taboos which may ultimately detract from their efficiency. Thus, the amount of energy needed to keep the mechanism running must not outweigh its advantages. This has, indeed, happened in many deteriorated traditions.

Today, most of us use magical thinking at some time or other – even if we call it only the power of 'positive thinking', 'willpower' and suchlike. Many superstitions – whatever their outward form – owe their durability and attractiveness to the fact that they tap into the current of magical thinking; touching wood, for example, implies that there are forces which may both influence and be influenced by actions on our part.

The emotional content of such magical residue makes it

addictive and difficult to unseat. Magical thinking may influence our everyday lives much more than we are willing to recognise and admit. If we – just as much as the overt practitioners of magic – could spot the mechanism at work, we could better judge how much of it is useful and productive and how much is not.

Notes

1. From: 'The Magus or Celestial Intelligencer', quoted in Daraul, Arkon: *Witches and Sorcerers*, London, 1962.
2. Zuesse, Evan M. *Ritual Cosmos*, Ohio, 1985.
3. Lee, Richard Borshay. *The !Kung San, Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society*, Cambridge, 1979.
4. Codrington, R.H. *The Melanesians*, Oxford, 1891.
5. Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough, A Study in Magic and Religion* (abridged edition), London, 1929.
6. Gager, John. *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, Oxford, 1992.
7. From the 3rd-4th century Jewish collection of spells and recipes, *Sepher ha Razim* – 'The Book of Mysteries', edited by M. Margalioth and translated into English by Michael Morgan, quoted in Gager.
8. Mackenzie, Sir George. *Laws and Customes of Scotland in matters Criminal*, 1678.
9. Carrington, Dorothy. *The Dream Hunters of Corsica*, London, 1995.
10. Lissner, Ivar. *Man, God and Magic*, London, 1961.
11. Bede. *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4:27.
12. *Sahr al Hind*, Delhi, 1875, quoted in Ali Shah, Sirdar Iqbal: *Black and White Magic*, London, 1952.
13. Quoted in Robinson, C.H. *Anskar the Apostle of the North*, London, 1921.
14. Burrows, Captain Guy. *The Land of the Pygmies*, London, 1898.
15. Moore. 'Divination, A New Perspective', *American Anthropologist*, 59:69-74 1957 (quoted in Smith, Richard: *Prelude to Science*, New York, 1975).

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