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THINKING ABOUT MAGIC

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Why do people practice magic? If magic is so self-evidently false from an empirical perspective, why does it maintain such a tenacious hold on the human imagination? Does the persistence of magical thinking imply that there are radically different, even incommensurable, ways of experiencing the world—in other words, autonomous native epistemologies? Finally, is it the job of the anthropologist confronted with magical acts and utterances to explain those practices in terms of local understandings of cause and effect or is it to translate them into categories meaningful to social scientists?

These questions have vexed anthropology since the discipline's earliest days. The Western scientific tradition that spawned anthropology cultivated disdain for all that was "magical," for magic had become a symbol of the irrationality over which science had triumphed. Ironically, the persistence of magic outside the halls of empirical research helped to justify the existence of anthropology as a distinct branch of science devoted to the investigation of human cultural progress. In the late nineteenth century, magic was precisely the sort of outré phenomenon that anthropologists were expected to incorporate into their models of human behavior. On the cusp of the twenty-first century, anthropology has become a more nervous and self-conscious enterprise, but magic still provides grist for diverse analytical mills. Despite more than a century of scrutiny, the forms, aims, and meanings of magic—even its very definition—remain the subjects of vigorous debate.

My goal in this chapter is to review some issues at stake in the interpretation of magical beliefs, acts, and utterances. By reviewing critically the strategies by which anthropologists have tried to make sense of magic, I wish to suggest

approaches that build on the insights and avoid the intellectual blind alleys of those who have preceded me. To gain some purchase on an extensive literature, I shall confine my discussion largely to magic in the narrow sense of ritual procedures intended to produce palpable effects in the physical world. Obvious examples include rites associated with fishing, farming, hunting, or canoe making. Although sorcery raises questions similar to those of magic, I have excluded it from the present discussion because its intimate links to social structure and patterns of social control demand a different approach than do rituals ostensibly intended to satisfy immediate practical needs.

One temptation that I have resisted—but only with great difficulty—is to argue that magic doesn't exist. Magic's terminological borders have been patrolled diligently for over a century, but anthropologists have been remarkably complacent about accepting the notion that the label is cross-culturally valid.[1] There are occasional dissident voices—among them J.D.Y. Peel (1969: 73), who contends that magic is merely a label for "those operations which the agents consider efficacious but which the scientific observer thinks deluded"—but they have thus far failed to dislodge magic from its important place in the display case of anthropological theory. The historical circumstances that shaped the concept of magic in the West are by no means universal, suggesting that the term should be applied to practices in other social settings only with the greatest care.[2] Anthropology awaits a bold reformulation that banishes "magic" from analysis altogether. Here I content myself with alerting the reader to the serious questions that have been raised about the term's utility.

MAGIC, MYSTICISM, AND THE ASSOCIATION OF IDEAS

In keeping with magic's obsession with the concrete, I present a brief case study of magical behavior that provides some solid ground from which we can survey the shifting currents of anthropological interpretation. The case is taken from my own fieldwork among a people of the Amazonian rain forest, the Aguaruna Indians of northeastern Peru.

Traditional Aguaruna subsistence is based on slash-and-burn agriculture, hunting, and fishing, but domesticated animals, especially poultry, have come to play an important role in the Aguarunas' twentieth-century household economy. The care of domestic fowl is mainly a responsibility of women. In addition to forms of attention that a Western expert in animal husbandry would recognize as useful and necessary, Aguaruna women tend their chickens by singing to them. More precisely, they perform *anen*, a term that encompasses a wide range of powerful songs said to produce real effects in the world. The words of one *anen* for poultry are as follows:

> A Nunkui woman cannot fail [Nunkui = a feminine earth spirit]
> Sparrow-hawk, sparrow-hawk
> The roosters call the sparrow-hawk

"*Tuntaya*," they say [i.e., they are so numerous and strong that they call the hawk in arrogant defiance of its power]
I feed my *puush*-birds [*puush* = a species of quail held to be prolific]
Make them grow rapidly, like the vines of the forest.

Besides strengthening their poultry with *anen*, Aguaruna women report feeding them an aquatic herb, *Lemna* (specics), "because the fowl will reproduce rapidly just as this plant does."

The song illustrates in microcosm certain features widely held to be typical of magical thought and practice. The singer equates herself with Nunkui, a spirit being who according to myth gave cultivated plants and pottery technology to the ancestors of the Aguaruna. Nunkui, in other words, stands as an evocative symbol of powerful femininity. The song marshals images of insolent roosters, flourishing bird life, and fast-growing rain forest vines. Its language is imperative ("Make them grow rapidly") rather than supplicative. The words of the song may be complemented by the action of feeding a conspicuously productive plant to the poultry.

This case epitomizes what E. B. Tylor (1871/1958) called the "association of ideas" characteristic of magic. The song juxtaposes words and symbolic objects with the poultry to induce a desired result. The allusion to Nunkui, for example, implies that naming this powerful being will imbue the singer with Nunkui's mythic prosperity. Feeding *Lemna* to the chickens is an attempt to transfer the plant's fruitfulness to the fowl through a form of contact that mimics empirical behavior.

According to Stanley J. Tambiah (1990), Tylor's insights about the association of ideas that characterizes magic were borrowed and further refined by Sir James Frazer in his massive comparative work *The Golden Bough* (1890/1958). Frazer divided the fallacious associations of magic into two general types or "laws": sympathetic magic, based on similarity, and contagious magic, based on contiguity. Following Frazer's system, the allusion to the quail called *puush* in the Aguaruna song illustrates the law of sympathy, whereas the contact between poultry and the aquatic weed *Lemna* illustrates the law of contagion.[3]

The early taxonomic work of Tylor and Frazer laid the foundation for two monumental studies of magic: Bronislaw Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935) and E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (1937). Both Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard contended that practitioners of magic maintain a strict mental separation of the magical from the practical. Evans-Pritchard (1937: 466) notes that his Azande informants were never as confident in magic as in what he calls "routine empirical activities." Malinowski's analysis is arguably more subtle. In Trobriand thought, he says, magic and practical work are never conflated, yet they are so seamlessly linked that they can be said to "form one continuous story" (Malinowski 1935: 1: 62).

If Evans-Pritchard were to analyze our case of Aguaruna poultry magic, I suppose he would see it as an adjunct to the practical business of feeding the

chickens, shielding them from predators, and so forth—but an adjunct that draws on "mystical" concepts. The mystical principles underlying the magic are, to use Evans-Pritchard's language, "vaguely formulated" and therefore unlikely to be refuted by experience.[4] Malinowski, by contrast, would no doubt call attention to the psychological function of the ritual procedures. They reassure a woman that she is in control of the forces that can devastate her flock: epidemics, night raids by possums and vampire bats, the predation of hawks, and so forth. Malinowski would also focus on the figurative language that informs Aguaruna magical songs. Magical utterances differ from ordinary speech because of what Malinowski called their high "coefficient of weirdness." The strangeness of the language supports his view that words are the fundamental building blocks of magic. "From the very use of speech men develop the conviction that knowledge of a name, the correct use of a verb, the right application of a particle, have a mystical power which transcends . . . mere utilitarian convenience" (Malinowski 1935: 2:233). Malinowski's sensitivity to metaphor, rather than his theory of magic's psychological function, has been the most enduring legacy of his analysis of magic and his strongest influence on later work.[5]

MAGIC AS PERFORMATIVE ACT

Despite the insights that Evans-Pritchard and Malinowski brought to their ethnographic portraits, there is still something unsatisfactory about the appeal both make to the notion of "mystical thought," which leaves one with the impression that underneath indigenous canons of common sense there lies a massive substrate of irrationality. Attempts to reframe the argument in more productive ways have drawn largely on a distinction between acts that are "instrumental" in intent and those that are allegedly "expressive." Scholars such as Leach (1968), Beattie (1970), and Tambiah (1968, 1973) argue that not only do magicians distinguish between the *methods* of magic and practical work; they also perceive them as having different *goals*. John Beattie (1970: 245) makes the case in the strongest possible terms when he claims that the magician realizes that he is "performing a rite, not applying laws of nature, however dimly apprehended." Tambiah (1968: 202) argues that magic may "simulate" work but is never confused with it. In short, magic is intended to say something, practical work to do something.[6] This analysis rescues magic from the realm of flawed technology or irrational thought and redefines it as a form of self-expression, more aesthetic than operational in its ambitions.

Central to the analysis of Tambiah and those pursuing related lines of analysis is the concept of *performativity*, taken from the work of the philosopher John Austin (1962). Speech events are said to be performative when words have the power to constitute a new reality. Conventional examples of performative rituals include baptisms ("I baptize thee . . ."), weddings, and investiture ceremonies. If the officiating person is qualified to perform the ritual, participants emerge from the rite as baptized, married, or invested with a new title. In his reanalysis

of Trobriand garden magic, Tambiah (1973: 221) argues that the spells documented by Malinowski are performative because "by virtue of being enacted . . . [they] achieve a change of state." The nature of this change remains murky in his analysis, however. It would appear that the transformation is one of understanding, accomplished through a union of the "technical, aesthetic and evaluative properties of [the magician's] activities, in a manner denied to us in our segmented civilization" (Tambiah 1968: 200).

Although there is little doubt that a Trobriand spell or, for that matter, any other ritual may change the internal state of its participants, Tambiah's formulation cannot withstand close scrutiny. First, it equates clearly performative rituals with rites whose transformative goal is far less specific.[7] Second, it ignores the question of magicians' motives and goals as they weave their spells. The Aguaruna woman who sings to her chickens certainly changes her internal state—magical songs, I should add, are often performed after the singer has consumed a small amount of tobacco water, inducing a mild intoxication—but from the actor's point of view this change serves the practical goal of producing healthy livestock. As Gilbert Lewis (1986: 415) has pointed out, if magicians performed spells for explicitly symbolic or metaphorical purposes, then we wouldn't consider them magic at all but instead a genre of poetry.

In fairness to Tambiah and others who subscribe to what has been called the "symbolist" position, it should be noted that the Trobriand garden ritual central to his analysis has a public and social aspect absent from the Aguaruna rite. Trobriand ritual may thus perform an important social function (for instance, vividly reminding participants of the moral implications of their horticultural labors, thus motivating them to work harder) independent of a specific gardener's immediate intentions. One drawback of the concept of performativity is that it works better when applied to group events than to those conducted privately in the service of specific practical ends. Since the power of language is arbitrary and socially determined, performative rituals always partake of a consensual character.[8]

In a later work, Tambiah (1990: 105–110) distances himself from the instrumental/expressive distinction in favor of a different set of complementary principles, which he calls "causality" and "participation." Causality is typified by the "language of distancing and neutrality of action and reaction," whereas participation denotes a sensibility in which a person is immersed in the natural and social worlds, experiencing a primordial oneness of subject and object. Tambiah finds these two principles operative in all societies but in different proportions. Applying the distinction to our Aguaruna case, he might say that the woman who sings to her chickens sees herself not as an autonomous person connected to her flock only by utilitarian links (feeding them, protecting them from harm) but as someone who literally shapes their world through her thoughts, gestures, and songs. The Aguaruna magician therefore evinces a stronger participatory sensibility than would her Anglo-American counterpart.

Although helpful in certain respects, Tambiah's framework still begs the difficult question, To what extent is magic *causal* in its intent?

Symbolist interpretations of magic, such as Tambiah's, typically privilege language over other aspects of ritual—for instance, sounds, smells, bodily movement, and material objects. This is consistent with a pervasive logocentrism in anthropological theory, most clearly manifest in approaches that see social life as text, to the apparent exclusion of such decidedly nontextual realities as physical coercion and the demands of subsistence. Where magic is concerned, language is an especially attractive focus because it is so self-evidently *symbolic*. Yet magic also draws on material objects or medicines for its power, forging undeniable links to practical activity. Consider, for example, the role of the plant *Lemna* in Aguaruna poultry magic. The use of a notably prolific species in magical procedures initially appears to illustrate the strategic use of metaphor by the Aguaruna magician. But the issue is more complex. Besides being one of the smallest species of flowering plants, *Lemna* produces leaves that are among the most nutritious in the plant kingdom. *Lemna*'s vernacular American name is "duckweed" in recognition of its value as a supplement to the diet of poultry. *Lemna*, in other words, is not only good to think; it's good for poultry to eat.[9] This knowledge forces us to move an element of Aguaruna practice from the category "magic" to that of "technology." But has anything changed for the Aguaruna magician? Has duckweed lost any of its power to evoke images of fecundity? One can only conclude that a convincing theory of magic must encompass both the role played by language and magic's strong ties to experimental process. Unfortunately, the cultural anthropologist who studies magic is likely to be more familiar with linguistics than with ethnobotany, ethnozoology, or other subspecialties that could lead ethnographic investigations of magic in new directions.

MAGIC AND CAUSAL MODELS

To move beyond the deficiencies of the instrumental/expressive dichotomy, one strategy is to return to a literalist perspective that takes the casual statements of interlocutors at face value and explores their full implications. If causal ideas are at work, however, they are likely to be more convoluted than the simple mechanical models traditionally thought to be magic's stock-in-trade. In his reinterpretation of the logic underlying headhunting in Southeast Asia, Needham (1983: 90) decries the tendency of ethnographers to propose mechanistic explanations for complex beliefs, a habit that "encourages a rigidity of outlook which is quite inappropriate to the subtle interplay of ideas" common to indigenous thought.

The Aguaruna woman who sings to her poultry operates within a causal framework in which poetics intertwines with pragmatics. Thoughtful Aguarunas assert that the world is a complicated place in which things are never quite as they seem. Ordinary practical knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient con-

dition for success. One must also acquire *yachamu*, wisdom or visionary insight, that permits the manipulation of unseen forces lying beneath the surface of things. The words of magical songs evoke images that alter the world to conform more closely to the singer's desires. The Aguarunas with whom I discussed these matters felt that in theory one could clear fields and grow crops solely through magic, as did the powerful beings whose exploits are detailed in Aguaruna mythology. But people today lack such absolute knowledge. They work by the sweat of their brows and through the strategic use of sounds, images, and medicines. Aguarunas insist that their attitude toward the practices we call magic is skeptical, even experimental.[10] Power objects are put to the test when hunting or gardening; if found wanting, the charms are unceremoniously discarded. People eagerly seek new power objects when they travel to other Indian communities or to Peruvian towns. In sum, the expressive/instrumental fails to illuminate Aguaruna magical practices, which are at once profoundly expressive *and* (from the actor's point of view) decisively instrumental.

Despite the long history of anthropological interest in magic, there exist remarkably few ethnographic studies that explore indigenous ideas of causality in a systematic fashion. A recent exception is Alan Tormaid Campbell's *To Square with Genesis* (1989), an analysis of animism as it is practiced by the Wayãpí of Brazil. Instead of imposing terms such as *magic* or *shamanism* on events recorded in the field, Campbell's analytical strategy is to assess native statements that strike him as strange or inexplicable. Campbell deals with these phenomena in two ways: He tracks the language used to label moments of logical breakdown, and he systematically probes the indigenous thought that makes the statements meaningful.[11]

His conclusion is that for all its exotic elements (for instance, a belief that people's noisy horseplay in a river will cause heavy rains), Wayãpí ontology is not as different from its Western counterpart as is commonly supposed:

> Causal reasoning discloses a continuum of intensities that varies through different degrees of vividness, conviction, and consistency of response to the animateness of what surrounds us. Just as it is inappropriate to make a terminal diagnosis of Wayãpí people as living within a carapace of animism, so it is misleading to assume that we live outside that. . . . These intensities [of Wayãpí causal reasoning] do seem extravagant to us, but they are so only in terms of extent and degree. They do not disclose a radically incompatible mode of being in the world. (Campbell 1989: 140–141)

With some justification, Campbell suggests that anthropologists are prone to fix their attention on the differences between an indigenous ontology and their own, while "avoiding the subtleties of more prosaic examples" (93).[12] To return to the Aguaruna example, an anthropologist who discovered that *Lemna* is nutritious poultry feed would typically reclassify its use as "technology," thus removing it from an account of Aguaruna magic. But for Aguarunas, leaves and songs form part of a unitary set of practices (to use Malinowski's language,

"one continuous story"), most of which would be comfortably accommodated within a Western ontology. The application of the term *magic* brackets off the exotic and occludes its links to the ordinary.

ARE MAGICIANS RATIONAL?

Campbell's assertions would seem unremarkable if they did not speak so forcefully to anthropological arguments concerning the rationality of those who practice magic. The Rationality Debate, pursued vigorously in three volumes of essays published between 1970 and 1982,[13] is notable both for the high quality of the erudition brought to bear on the problem of magic and the distance between these concerns and those of anthropology only a decade later.

The participants in the Rationality Debate—notably, Robin Horton, Steven Lukes, Peter Winch, Martin Hollis, and Ernest Gellner—explored in detail the possibility that there are qualitative differences between what Gellner (1973) called the "savage and the modern mind." A key question in the assessment of these allegedly different "minds" was whether primitive social systems allowed and encouraged critiques of received knowledge in ways analogous to the experimental process of Western science. It was presumed that fallacious beliefs such as those underlying magic could only persist in the absence of a tradition of systematic skepticism. These reflections led naturally to the broader question of how anthropologists are to arrive at a cross-culturally valid notion of "rationality."

The conspicuous role played by philosophers in the Rationality Debate had the salutary effect of forcing anthropologists to be more precise in their use of key terms—for example, *belief system, rationality*, and *traditional thought*. Unfortunately, some of these same philosophers naively assumed that complex cultural systems should be reducible to an internally consistent set of logical propositions. This assumption was persuasively challenged by Dan Sperber (1982), who argued that people in all societies routinely traffic in abstract utterances that are "semi-propositional" in nature. Rather than providing evidence of our irrationality, semipropositional representations act as "sources of suggestion in creative thinking" (171).

The metaphorical and analogical thinking characteristic of magic has long been regarded as a potent source of creativity in technology, science, and cognition in general. What is surprising is how rarely this insight is applied to the study of innovation in preindustrial societies. A classic example drawn from Western history is the Doctrine of Signatures, the belief (essentially, an ontological assumption) that the healing powers of plants are signaled by their form, color, and smell. This provided a framework for experimentation that, while thoroughly "magical" in its underlying structure, eventually produced empirical advances. In an exploration of analogous symbolic principles in Aztec medical thought, Bernard Ortiz de Montellano (1986) has demonstrated that if we use *Aztec* etiological beliefs and expected outcomes to evaluate efficacy, most of

their medicines were effective (124). When Aztec healers used medicines, they were enacting and expressing specific ontological principles, but they expected that enactment to produce practical results—and it did.

My point in exploring this line of analysis is not to rescue the old argument that magic is an embryonic form of science. I wish instead to underscore the problems of seeing magic solely as an inventory of exotic beliefs, to the exclusion of elements of magical practice that promote creative exploration of the natural world. The characteristic integration of magic with other kinds of activity—a feature of interest to Evans-Pritchard and Malinowski—suggests that magic can be separated analytically from those activities only with the greatest care. To do otherwise is to ride roughshod over the understandings of those whom we seek to comprehend (cf. de Sardan 1992).

The Rationality Debate drew attention to one indisputable difference between tribal societies and industrial ones: the means by which knowledge is produced, modified, and consumed, at least within some segments of society. The Enlightenment established the institutional arrangements and habits of mind that support Western science, which Tambiah (1990: 140) describes as a "labelled, self-conscious and reflexive activity of experimentation, measurement and verification." By implication, anthropologists should move beyond an essentialist concern with "modes of thought" to an analysis of how societies create and transmit knowledge—in short, the study of cognitive ecology. Yet there has been remarkably little research of this kind, aside from the studies of native classificatory systems that became popular in the 1970s and 1980s.[14]

The cognitive innovation that has thus far received the greatest attention is literacy. Jack Goody (1977) is prominent among those who have argued that literacy opens the door to qualitatively different understandings.[15] The essence of Goody's argument is that writing is a revolutionary cognitive technology that makes belief in magic impossible to sustain:

> The magic of the spell is dependent, at least in part, upon the virtual identity of the speaker and spoken. How can one separate a man from his words? . . . Writing puts a distance between a man and his verbal acts. He can now examine what he says in a more objective manner. He can stand aside, comment upon, even correct his own creation. . . . [Writing] permits a different kind of scrutiny of current knowledge, a more deliberate sorting of *logos* from *doxa*, a more thorough probing into the "truth." (150)

Here Goody echoes the observation of Evans-Pritchard (1937: 475) that the Azande fail to perceive the contradictions in their magic "because the beliefs are not all present at the same time but function in different situations," a reality that would be transformed if Azande magic were codified in portable written documents.

Goody's thesis has received its share of criticism (for instance, Halverson 1992), largely because it exaggerates literacy's social impact and underestimates the degree to which skepticism, self-criticism, and syllogistic reasoning can be

found among nonliterate peoples. It also perpetuates a key blunder of the Rationality Debate by assuming that scientific reasoning is the normal mode of thought employed by citizens of the developed world—or to amend a bon mot of Marshall Sahlins, that the science of the West contrasts with the magic of the Rest. But science has always been the methodology of an intellectual elite, not the practice of the masses. Aside from countless studies of "folkloric" forms of magic surviving in pockets of North American and European society, there is a small but growing literature on the persistence among highly educated adults of thinking that is magical in its form if not in its content.[16] Even more challenging to the pieties of scientific ascendancy is the appearance of extravagant forms of magic in such places as middle-class London (Luhrmann 1989) and the plantations and mines of working-class South America (Taussig 1980). The wage laborers studied by Taussig use magic to grapple with the logic of capitalism, which to them seems both irrational and devastatingly inhumane. In contrast, the middle-class witches studied by Luhrmann seek a reenchantment of their lives and are after mystery as much as meaning. (Ironically, Luhrmann's witches use literacy not to liberate themselves from magic but to educate themselves in its subtleties.) In both ethnographic cases, magic offers an implicit critique of the modernity toward which Evans-Pritchard and Malinowski assumed the human race inexorably to be moving.

CONCLUSIONS

By the mid-1980s, the Rationality Debate, which had invigorated the interpretation of magical acts and utterances, was displaced by other concerns considered more urgent within anthropology. The index to the volumes of the *American Ethnologist* published between 1985 and 1989 lists more references under "fisheries" (two) and "tattoos" (one) than under "magic" (none). Such a decline of interest in a classic problem could represent a mere shift in intellectual fashion, but it also reflects irreversible changes that have taken place within anthropology. It is no longer possible, for instance, to think of magic as an atavistic cultural trait doomed to eventual extinction; instead, it may be an enduring quality of the human imagination. Moreover, anthropologists are today less likely to see systems of thought as homogeneous and static than as historically contingent and internally contested, prompting different questions about how knowledge is created, controlled, used, and resisted. Even the doctrine of cultural relativism, which as recently as the 1980s seemed to offer a perspective from which one could undertake an impartial assessment of practices such as magic, is now being held up to critical scrutiny.[17]

It is by now clear that the traditional distinctions between magic, science, and religion have outlived their utility and, in fact, represent an obstacle to deeper understanding. Instead of conceptualizing magic as a discrete set of beliefs or practices, we might think of it as a *sensibility*—an intermediate point on a spectrum ranging from the purely instrumental to the purely expressive, or a state in which cause and effect are mediated by metaphor. Alternatively, we

could reserve "magic" as a provisional label for moments of ethnographic breakdown, when our understanding is challenged by that of our interlocutors, a situation demanding deeper exploration of local ideas about how things come to pass in the world.

Another impediment to debate on the meaning of magic is that it has taken place in the long shadows cast by Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard. Few areas of contention in anthropology have been so thoroughly dominated by only two ethnographic accounts—albeit great ones. Surely it is time to declare a moratorium on reanalysis of the Trobriand and Azande material in favor of new case studies that explore the myriad lacunae in our understanding of the significance of magic from the actor's point of view.

If the links between magic and ritual have been investigated in great detail, the connections between magic and technology remain terra incognita. Research by scholars such as Ortiz de Montellano (1986) and Johns (1986) suggests how much we have yet to learn about the application of indigenous symbolic systems to the exigencies of survival—or, to use the formulation of Marcel Mauss (1902/1972: 141), the ways in which magic has "dealt with material things, carried out real experiments, and even made its own discoveries."[18]

Magic also merits the attention of scholars interested in the cultural construction and negotiation of gender.[19] Since men tend to find themselves drawn into the orbit of neocolonial economic relations and Western educational systems before women, women may become the principal repositories of all that is "traditional," including knowledge of magic—a development that can produce subtle, and still poorly understood, changes in relations between the sexes. In such cases, is magic a source of power for women, or does it become emblematic of their estrangement from new values and political realities? Are women covert guardians of ways of remembering (Connerton 1989) that play a key role in moments of cultural crisis or redefinition?

Finally, the revival of magic in unlikely places raises a host of questions about nostalgia, the search for authentic experience, and the dynamics of accommodation and resistance in mass society. When middle-class accountants and computer programmers take up magic, they act with a degree of self-consciousness that contrasts sharply with the taken-for-granted quality of magic in tribal societies. Yet the discontinuities between the two cases may be more apparent than real; the magical behavior of modern discontents may prove to be a source of new insights into the understandings of nonliterate peoples. At the very least, the persistence of magical practices in the late twentieth century offers compelling evidence that the anthropological casebook on magic is far from closed.

NOTES

I wish to thank David B. Edwards, Stephen D. Glazier, and Peter Just for their comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

1. I make no attempt to do justice to the vast literature on the proper definition of

magic. Significant contributions of which I am aware include Malinowski (1954), Rosengren (1976), and O'Keefe (1982). More recently, Tambiah (1990) has reviewed the definition question and analyzed the particular historical circumstances that determined the Western concept of magic.

2. Even classic studies of magic are marked by a disturbing vagueness about how the English term *magic* maps on to the beliefs and practices of the society under consideration. Evans-Pritchard (1937: 9), for instance, translates the Azande word *ngua* as "magic," yet he also notes that it is not applied to all the practices that a Western observer would consider magical but *is* applied to others—for example, leechcraft—that Westerners probably wouldn't consider magic at all. Malinowski's analysis of the definition question as it applies in the Trobriand Island case is more convoluted. Trobrianders classify garden ritual as *towosi*. "Magic and practical work are, in native ideas, inseparable from each other," says Malinowski (1935: 1:62), "though they are not confused." Nevertheless, what seems to separate *towosi* from ordinary work is not an intrinsic difference in the two activities or a marked divergence of goals but rather that expertise in *towosi* is invested in a ceremonial specialist rather than in the gardener himself (1: 77). When Malinowski insists that "magic is based on myth [and] practical work on empirical theory," he only displaces ambiguity to another level, as myth seems to be regarded as "really real" among the Trobrianders. When I studied the magical practices of the Aguaruna of Amazonian Peru (Brown 1986), I encountered no word that could be glossed as "magic," though there were broad terms that encompassed categories of magical songs or paraphernalia. Like the Trobrianders, the Aguaruna see magic as a set of procedures that are complementary to, and intertwined with, practices that we would call empirical. The Aguaruna think of magic as a challenging and esoteric form of action but nonetheless "real" for that.

The limitations of magic as a universal classificatory term are discussed with great clarity by John Skorupski, who asserts that "the traditional European conception of magic as a sacrilegious perversion of religious lore is probably responsible for a number of misconceptions in social anthropology" (Skorupski 1976: 159).

3. Although Frazer's work has virtually no place in modern anthropology except as a historical footnote, his system of classification has been resurrected—albeit in more recondite language—in the research of Hallpike (1979). Hallpike identifies forms of magic such as the Aguaruna song analyzed here as instances of "nominal realism" (mistaking words for things) and "hypostatization of process" (mistaking processes or recurrent events for things). The alleged frequency of these and other errors of thought in tribal societies leads Hallpike to conclude that preindustrial peoples are stuck in some "pre-operatory" stage of cognitive evolution analogous to that of Western children.

4. Jahoda (1982) provides an illuminating critique of the notion that there is a discrete form of thought that can be labeled "mystical" or "magical."

5. See, for example, Brown (1984, 1986), Endicott (1981), Rosaldo (1975), Rosaldo and Atkinson (1975), and Tambiah (1968). Malinowski's psychological theory of magic lives on in Gmelch's essay on baseball magic (Gmelch 1987), frequently reprinted in anthropology readers.

6. The definitive analysis of the distinction between what has come to be called the "intellectualist" and "symbolist" positions is Skorupski (1976).

7. More detailed critiques of this use of performativity will be found in Ahern (1979) and Gardner (1983).

8. Roy A. Rappaport, one of the few analysts of religious ritual who has paid atten-

tion to the implications of ritual events conducted in private, notes that "in solitary rituals various parts of the psyche may be brought in touch with each other," which leads him to identify ritual as "auto-communicative as well as allo-communicative" (Rappaport 1979: 178).

9. For details, see Swain (1981: 101–110). The relevance of *Lemna*'s nutritional content would obviously depend on whether Aguaruna poultry were fed the plant in a relatively systematic fashion, and in what quantities.

10. Even analysts who hold that magic has a primarily expressive intent acknowledge that practitioners may be more pragmatic in their attitude toward magical rites than they are toward public rituals of a conventionally liturgical character, which for Rappaport (1979: 196) exact an implicit "act of acceptance." In a recent essay, however, Grimes (1992) makes a persuasive case for the possibility of criticism from within a community of ritual participants.

11. I borrow the term *breakdown* from Michael Agar (1986: 20), who defines these moments as instances when "something does not make sense; one's assumption of perfect coherence is violated."

12. Campbell's assertions echo those of Dan Sperber (1982), who argues that anthropologists play fast and loose with the concept of cultural relativism. On the one hand, Sperber says, anthropologists have a vested interest in portraying other cultures as qualitatively different from our own. (Otherwise, why would anyone need an anthropologist to understand them?) On the other, the very work of anthropologists contradicts the alleged incommensurability of cultures: "[A]nthropologists transform into unfathomable gaps the shallow and irregular cultural boundaries that they have found not so difficult to cross, thereby protecting their own sense of identity, and providing their philosophical and lay audience with just what they want to hear" (Sperber 1982: 180).

13. Hollis and Lukes (1982), Horton and Finnegan (1973), and Wilson (1970).

14. Notable exceptions include Hallpike (1979), Scribner and Cole (1981), and the early groundbreaking studies of Mead (1932), Luria (1976), and Vygotsky (1962). See Harris et al. (1991) for research on "magical" thought among Western children, and Merrill (1988) for a study of the distribution and social negotiation of different concepts of the soul among the Rarámuri of northern Mexico.

15. Halverson (1992) provides a more complete bibliography of Goody's writings on literacy and other key works on this subject.

16. See, for instance, Nemeroff and Rozin (1992), Rozin and Nemeroff (1990), and Shweder (1977).

17. Aside from the works of Sperber (1982) and Campbell (1989) cited earlier, the debate between Geertz (1986) and Rorty (1991) about relativism and ethnocentrism attests to a growing uneasiness about the concept of cultural relativism.

18. Johns (1986) evaluates cultural selection for specific chemicals in two plants domesticated by prehistoric peoples of the Peruvian Highlands. His research suggests that indigenous Andean notions of male-female duality may have structured people's modification of these cultivars.

19. A provocative exception is Kane (1994).

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