

Do You Believe in Magic?

Elizabeth Graham, UCL Institute of Archaeology
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Edited by Ceri Houlbrook

Magic, n.

- a. The use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world, usually involving the use of an occult or secret body of knowledge; sorcery, witchcraft (OED)

Pinning down the meaning of the word 'magic' is as difficult as 'religion'. Yet what makes these terms problematic also makes them interesting. Looking into the origins and usage of the term 'magic' tells us as much about ourselves as it does about what we think of as 'magical' properties. This is because 'magic' seems to have originated as a term to describe the practices of an 'other', which gets us to examine who 'we' really are.

A *magus* was a member of the Persian priestly class. According to the OED, the *magi* were originally members of a tribe or clan in ancient Persia responsible for ritual. With the unification of the Persian Empire in the 6th century B.C., the magi helped to spread Zoroastrianism. The OED suggests that it was during the Achaemenid period (550-330 B.C.), when magi lived and practiced in Babylon (then a major administrative centre), that their practices became more widely known, and that at some point in time the term 'magic' began to be used to describe their practices and beliefs. Christianity was in the offing, however, and it is inevitable that the term 'magic'—as a set of practices associated with a rather powerful rival 'other'—would acquire a conflation with the devil and demons. Magic became defined as wonders wrought by demons whereas those wrought by Christians were 'miracles' (Ward 1987: 9).

When anthropology first became established as a discipline, in the early 20th century, one of its main preoccupations was the relationship between magic, science and religion (Gusterson 2004: 7). Anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard (1976) and Malinowski (1954) began to question general assumptions that divided 'primitives' and their magic from Europe and science. Both men made the point that the people they studied—the Azande and Trobriand islanders, respectively—were well aware of the empirical

relationships in the world around them. The Trobrianders were said to turn to magic only when the practical knowledge and technology they had accumulated did not work. Evans-Pritchard argued that Azande witchcraft came into play only when events could not be explained by other means. An example from a western worldview might be the way we use 'coincidence' or 'chance' to account for an occurrence that cannot be explained by cause-and-effect; the Azande would attribute such an occurrence to 'witchcraft' (Gusterson 2004: 7; Evans-Pritchard 1976: 63-83; Malinowski 1954).

Despite anthropologists' attempts to move away from Victorian and Edwardian dichotomies (they use magic/we use science; they have magic/we have religion), the idea that 'magic' actually meant something did not go away. Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard simply made the point that the Trobrianders and Azande lived in a more logical world than had theretofore been attributed to 'primitives', but this still left room for magic and 'witchcraft' as viable terms. 'Witchcraft' of course is our word. *Mangu* is the zande term for the substance found in a person's body that gives that person the capacity for what we call 'witchcraft', and *boro mangu* is someone who possesses and uses this capacity (Marc Brightman, personal communication 2015). The question is, why did Evans-Pritchard use the term 'witchcraft' to describe Azande practice? Why did he not use their own words? To turn again to the OED, 'witchcraft' is defined as 'the exercise of supernatural power supposed to be possessed by persons in league with the devil or evil spirits'. Like 'magic', witchcraft has its origins in the Christian world view. Essentially, *any* practices or rituals or beliefs that were not in accord with Christianity were labelled magic or witchcraft, and any effectiveness was said to be the work of demons or the devil. Does this historical scenario leave us any room to argue that 'magic' can be used productively?

One way would be to recognise fully and openly that 'magic' as a term is problematic. It did not arise as a straightforward attempt to describe an object or an action; it does not represent an exclusive set of ideas (Graham 2009: 19). Instead, there developed an arrangement of ideas at a particular point in time (Christianity and Christian evangelization) that made the concept of magic as we have come to define it possible (Hacking 2002: 37). I say 'as we have come to define it' because, prior to the early Christian era, if the term was used at all, 'magic' referred to the particular rituals and practices of the Persian magi resident in Babylon without the deleterious connotations

subsequently assigned to it under Christianity. Thus we have to ask ourselves what we mean when we refer to shoes concealed within house walls or cowries used in medicine as ‘magical’ practices.

It is likely that some of us (the authors of papers in this issue) would say that we practice no formal ‘religion’ and therefore do not see ‘magic’ as the work of a demon or the devil. But even practicing Christians or Muslims are unlikely to use the word ‘magic’ this way these days. Thus magic has broken away to some extent from its tether to religion. On the other hand, using ‘religion’ to help clarify ‘magic’ is less than satisfying, because the term ‘religion’, like ‘magic’, has roots in particular historical circumstances (Graham 2011: 66-80; Graham et al. 2013: 166-168). ‘Religion’ is said to derive from the Latin root *religare*, meaning ‘to bind’ (Graham et al. 2013: 167). It is a western category and did not exist as a concept in Asia, at least prior to modern times (Bowie 2000, 22n23, citing Pieris 1988: 90); nor was ‘religion’ a concept that existed among the Precolumbian Maya (Pharo 2007), whom I study. Indications are that the problems defining relationships between magic, religion, and science (Cunningham 1999; Tambiah 1990) arise from the fact that each word materialised not as a name for a clearly defined concept that covered activities that were not something else but as devices to create and maintain divisions under particular socio-cultural agendas. As Tambiah (1990: 2) observes, ‘we have to confront today the question whether or not the categories of magic, science and religion may be “tendentious” and their analytical value rendered suspect by their historical “embeddedness”’.

Does this leave us room to argue that ‘magic’ can nonetheless be used productively? We could take the first part of the OED definition and use ‘magic’ to apply to the use of activities or observances or actions intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world, without reference to witchcraft or the occult or the devil. We could also draw from Tambiah the idea that magic involves ritual acts focused on objects and their properties (Cunningham 1999, 68). There is also the fact that ‘magic’ has taken on new meaning over time. As articulated by Simon Coleman (2008: 11), ‘The magic of today as practiced in the West (and emergent when Malinowski was writing) has a far more romantic aura, and it resonates with anthropological worldviews in its eclecticism and self-conscious embrace of otherness.’ In this light, ‘magic’ can be used in contexts to investigate, as Houlbrook suggests, the complex biographies of ritual and

folkloric objects within museum contexts. Given our updated definition and connotations, however, objects labelled ‘magic’ in museums perforce must also include elite and/or institutional objects—for example, monarchs’ books of prayer, church candles, saints’ statues in shrines or chapels, or the objects used to present offerings during mass or services—because all these are objects used in ritual activities or observances and are intended to influence the course of events. This use of ‘magic’ would probably raise a few eyebrows, but it would require museum-goers to drop expectations that magic is confined to folk or popular belief. It would also put emphasis on the idea that magic covers all attempts, institutional or otherwise, that people make to control their lives. Thus there is legitimate power in magic as an act of negotiation, even if the result (by the cause-and-effect standard of science) is not achieved.

There remains the issue, however, given its history, of whether or not ‘magic’ should be applied in the context of non-European or non-western objects. If the objects are deemed to be associated with rituals or activities intended to influence the course of events, best practice would call for the use of local and indigenous terms whenever possible, without translation—as pointed out above in the case of Azande *mangu*. It is possible to describe *mangu*, for example, without calling it witchcraft. If ‘magic’ is used as an organizing theme, it will be important to convey, particularly in association with European material culture, that ‘magic’ can be applied to *any* object associated with an activity intended to influence the course of events, and not just ‘popular’ beliefs. This will hasten the self-critical process that began long ago with Evans-Pritchard and Malinowski.

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