

Magic

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*My late father-in-law, Dr. A.T. Lucas, former Director of the National Museum of Ireland, had a long-time association with the Thomond Archaeological Society, as member, author and lecturer [see this Journal, 28(1986), 116-117]. A scholar of national and international renown in the field of Irish Folklife Studies, he naturally had a wide interest in and knowledge of the related field of Ethnology, or Anthropology in the American use of the term, though never venturing into publication on the subject. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when I discovered amongst his papers the typescript of a lecture on "Magic" which he gave somewhere many, many years ago, probably in the 1940s. In it he not only displays his wide reading and interests, but also draws conclusions which demonstrate an approach which extends well beyond mere interest in the curious, an approach which presents a social, psychological slant not confined to primitive peoples in Central Africa, and Melanesia and Australia, but also applicable even to us here in Ireland. There are several publications providing Irish comparanda similar to many of the superstitious practices cited in this article, perhaps the best being W.G. Wood-Martin's *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, 2 vols., London 1902. Indeed, Dr. Lucas' own article on "The Social Role of Relics and Reliquaries in Ancient Ireland" published in *J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland*, 116(1986), 5-37, particularly the sections on 'Relics for Curing' (pp. 29-32) and 'Cursing with Bells and Bachalls' (pp. 32-34), might also be usefully referred to. It is with that in mind that we publish this rather unusual paper.*

E.R., Hon. Editor

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No one who hopes, even dimly, to appreciate the life of those distant peoples, the study of whose remains forms the science of archaeology, can afford to disregard the subject of magic. The popular conception of magic does not go very far beyond the idea of the fairy who with a touch of her wand changes children into Guinea pigs, or the witches in Macbeth stewing eye of newt and toe of frog, or some withered sorcerer muttering meaningless mumbo-jumbo over an onion in the hope of turning it into Peach Melba. What I have to say tonight was put together in an endeavour to show that magic is in reality something quite different and that, given its premises, it constitutes a perfectly logical system, partaking of the nature of a veritable science. If what I have to say is painfully familiar to some among my listeners they will have to suffer it, for I hope there may be some to whom it may be at least new.

Now, among ourselves magic survives only in childrens' stories and a few decayed rites, and we are all agreed to regard it as childishness in excelsis, but among primitive peoples it is quite otherwise. I quote Malinowski*: "Magic is all-pervading in the Trobriands. Everything that vitally affects the native is accompanied by magic. All economic activities have their magic; love, welfare of babies, talents and crafts, beauty and agility can be fostered or frustrated by magic". The same, in varying degrees, is true of every primitive community. In many cases every important act in the life of the individual is performed in duplicate: there is

*Dr. Bronislaw Malinowski, Professor of Anthropology at the University of London in the 1920-'30s. -E.R.

the physical act itself, whether it be hunting, canoe-building, sowing crops or killing one's enemy, and the magical act which accompanies, or rather precedes it, in order to render it efficacious. The magical system runs parallel to every form of activity. Magic burdens primitive man with a formidable ceremonial, the performance he dare not shirk. As well, it afflicts him with a load of wholly imaginary anxieties and fears quite foreign to us, and often leads him to conclusions which run directly counter to his common sense.

I do not propose to trouble you with theories of the origin of magic, whether it developed independently of religion or originated in a belief in spirits. We will take it as we find it: and as we find magic may be divided into two great categories: sympathetic and contagious. Let us take the former first. Sympathetic magic is based on the principle that like produces like, that an effect resembles a cause, and that the magician can produce any effect he likes merely by imitating it. Everybody is familiar with the example which consists in making a wax image of your enemy and then melting it. As the image melts so does the enemy decline and die. This practice survives in parts of the world, *e.g.* among the Fellahin of Egypt where wax or earthen figures of the person one dislikes are made. The former are thrown into the fire, the latter into water and as they disintegrate they are believed to bring about the desired results. Among the Langat Malays the formula runs as follows: "You make an image to resemble a corpse out of wax and of the length of a footstep. If you want to cause sickness, you pierce the eyes and blindness results; or you pierce the waist and the stomach gets sick, or you pierce the head and the head gets sick. If you want to cause death you transfix it from the head right down through the body. Then you enshroud the image as you would a corpse, and you pray over it as if you were praying over the dead. Finally you bury it in the middle of the path leading to the place of the person whom you want to charm so that he may step over it". An unusual application of this particular rite was reported from Egypt by a writer in *Man*, 1931. A man had been run over and killed by a train and his ghost, like those of all who have met a violent death, was believed to haunt the spot where he died, most malificent. The neighbouring villagers, to lay the ghost, set up a rude clay image of a man and as it wasted with the weather, the haunting grew weaker and eventually ceased.

These examples demonstrate the *modus operandi* of sympathetic magic. Let us see some ways in which it is applied in daily life. We can begin anywhere. Take hunting. All the world over hunters have their own system of magic, varying naturally from one people to another, but in sum all curiously similar. Among the Wandamba tribe of the Ulanga valley in East Africa the preliminary preparations for a hunting expedition last seven days. These seven days are spent, not, as you might imagine in target practice or working up muscle, but in the concoctions of various magical medicines to ensure success in the forthcoming chase. One of the rites consists in cutting a series of small gashes in each others' arms, perhaps a dozen or so in each limb. This is said to make them shoot well - why we are not told. When the game is sighted, they pause to rub medicine into these gashes - this is done to diminish their scent. While on the expedition none of the hunters must break or cut firewood with any force or the tusk of the elephant will be broken in falling. But not alone is there an intimate magical connection between the acts of the hunter himself and his fortunes in the hunt, but the success of the party largely depends on the conduct of their wives. If, during his absence, the hunter's wife wishes to give anything to another or receive it she must first place it on the ground. Otherwise the elephant would snatch the gun from her husband's hands. She must not sew or thorns will enter her husband's feet. She must not wear loose or flapping garments or the elephant's ears will flap as they do when it is angry or excited. If she is guilty of any noisy action the elephants will be restless and dangerous. She also takes care that no one passes behind her while she is seated or an elephant will come up behind her husband

unawares. If an accident does happen to the hunter, he duly blames his wife, and on his return takes the appropriate action.

As I have said, sympathetic magic finds a place in every form of activity. Thus in North Borneo when a party of men go into the jungle collecting camphor they must not take any oil with them. If they did, the camphor which is found in small pockets or crystals in the grain of the wood of the camphor tree would dissolve and their labour be in vain. For a similar reason they are forbidden to wash themselves. When the Jahuns of Malaya go camphor collecting, they must eat all their food dry and their salt must not be pounded fine. If it is eaten fine the camphor, when found, will be in fine grains, but if it is eaten coarse the grains of camphor will be large.

The ceremony of rain-making, which is found everywhere in the world where drought is liable to occur, is a very perfect example of sympathetic magic. It consists in essentials of a more or less realistic representation of rain made by pouring water from a height. The rite as performed in Banks Islands is exceedingly picturesque. A big clam shell is dug into the ground and a bright orange fruit is strung on a creeper to imitate a rainbow. A new and glittering clam shell is opened and shut rapidly to imitate lightening. Thunder is simulated by beating the shell of a coconut on the ground and a fire is kindled so that the smoke may represent clouds. In San Cristoval, in the Solomons, on the other hand, the ceremony is reduced to a symbolism that would do credit to a modernist painter. A coconut frond is taken and bent in an arch to represent the whole sky clouded over. This has the added advantage that when it has rained enough you can stop it by merely breaking the frond. Alternatively, a fan is waved thus dispelling the clouds, and if a fan is not conveniently come by waving the hands will do instead.

Magic, as distinct from fertility rites which are based on a different set of concepts, finds its place in agriculture too. In Bunyoro, Central Africa, it is believed that the waxing moon is the propitious time for sowing crops. Anything sown during the waning of the moon on the other hand will be unthrifty and poor. The Kalantans of Malaya observe the following rules in planting: Plant maize with a full stomach and let your dibble be thick, as this will swell the maize ear. Plant coconuts when the stomach is overburdened with food; run quickly and throw the coconut into the hole prepared for it without straightening the arm: if you straighten it the fruit stalk will break.

In the examples we have so far considered there is always a conscious agent performing the magical act or avoiding doing it, but magical results may be brought about accidentally so to speak. For instance, if a man of the Sakai (Ulu Kampar) while out in the jungle suffers from a sensation of swelling at the stomach and remembers that he has thrown away a cigarette-end or some remnants of food into a pool, a bamboo stump, or any other place containing water, he will return, search for and remove what he has thrown away. As the cigarette-end or food had become swollen through absorbing the water, his stomach had swelled in sympathy. Similarly if a man on a journey is troubled with a rash or with itching sensations in his body he will return to his last camping place and dig up the ground on which he lay to see if there is an ants' nest in the soil.

Needless to say, sympathetic magic is just as frequently used to injure one's enemy as to benefit oneself. Among the Ainu of Yezo, relates Rev. John Batchelor, who lived among them for twenty years, should a woman desire to get rid of her spouse she may kill him in the following way: "She should take his head-dress, wrap it up in a bag in the shape of a corpse ready for burial, dig a deep hole and place it in it. She then should pray saying: 'When this headdress and bag rot may my husband also die and rot with them. It is for this I am now digging his grave. O thou demon named Toiko-shimpuk, hear me. Be quick and take his soul and make it into one of thine own kind'"

If you want to sow dissension between man and wife you proceed thus if you wish to do it as they do it in Malaya: "Make two wax figures taking care that one resembles the wife, the other the husband. Sit down with your legs stretched out before you and hold the figures face to face while you repeat the charm thrice, and at the end of each repetition breathe upon their heads. Then lay them on the ground so that they both look away from each other. Burn incense and repeat the charm 22 times over the man and 22 times over the woman. Now put them back to back and wrap them up in 7 thicknesses of leaves and tie them with a thread of 7 colours wrapped 7 times round them and bury them. Dig them up after 7 days and see if they are still there. If you find them the charm has failed, but if not it will work and they will assuredly be divorced".

The Kiwai Papuans of New Guinea can make a man's dog useless for hunting by the following means. A piece of dry bamboo is taken and made into a tongs. The dog's mouth is squeezed shut with this. The tongs is then tied up with string and buried opposite the door of the owner of the dog, where the dog is sure to tread on it. In this way the dog is rendered incapable of giving cry when chasing pigs and so will be worthless.

The Kwottos of Nigeria have a rite to pull out an enemy's tongue. A gourd containing charcoal of various plants is prepared. At the neck of the gourd a small iron hook is fixed and is treated with medicine from the gourd. The hook is then attached to some flexible object like the branch of a tree and then pulled heavily down. At the same time the operator calls out the name of his enemy and expresses the wish that his tongue may be pulled out of his mouth and the victim die.

When a man in the Solomons wishes to harm another he goes into the forest and selects a tree or shrub in a windy spot. He then breaks the twigs or branches one by one, beginning from the bottom and saying "I break your big toe, ankle, knee, etc.". When he comes to the centre of the body he passes over that and goes on to the neck, teeth and other parts of the head. Finally he says "Break off his liver" as he breaks off the top shoot or branch.

As I have remarked, some of the conclusions forced on primitive man by his belief in magic are exceedingly strange. In British Guiana an Indian who is the father of a young child will not eat the flesh of the capybara, a large rodent with protruding teeth, lest the teeth of the child grow like those of the animal. If he eats the flesh of the spotted labba, another rodent, the child's skin will be spotted.

But for sheer cussedness the procedure in the Ibibio tribe of Nigeria takes a lot of beating. If a man were wounded in battle and the wound attributed to the superiority of the enemy's magic, the wound was not washed with hot water as was the usual treatment. Instead, the native doctor went into the bush and cut a stick the size of the gash. This substitute was washed and tended as though it was the real wound, until by sympathetic magic the injured flesh grew whole.

The other great department of magic, contagious magic, is based on the notion that what has once been in contact with a person retains an intimate connection with him thereafter. For this reason primitive peoples are obliged to take precautions which seem ridiculous, until we realise they believe that things which they have touched or used may be used by an evil-doer to harm them. For instance, all over the world we find that people take the utmost pains to destroy their hair-clippings or nail-parings. Should an enemy come by these he would have them at his mercy. It would only be necessary for him to perform the appropriate ceremony over these objects to inflict suffering or death on the person to whom they belonged. It is not altogether an unmixed blessing that some of these good old beliefs have died out amongst us. If they were still in force there would be no necessity for such uncivilised notices as "*Seiliu Toirmisghthe*: Please do not spit", for spittle was another thing that the sorcerer could use to

bewitch the spitter. The precaution likewise extended to such things as food-leavings, and we read that among the Maoris that "When a chief eats food not a scrap of it is allowed to escape and if the meal is too much for him to consume, the uneaten remainder is carefully gathered up and taken away by him to avoid his being bewitched through its agency: even the waste crumbs are gathered up and destroyed".

Examples like these could be multiplied indefinitely, but once the general principle has been understood there is no purpose in repetition. More interesting are some of the social consequences of this belief. One of the most important of these was the fact that everyone was everyone else's potential killer and the sorcerer, the person specially skilled in the use of magic, became a chief power in the community. Very often the sorcerer was real enough in so far as he was a real person performing real physical acts. Very often too, this real sorcerer's magic produced real results, for it has been vouched for again and again that if a person believed himself to have been bewitched, that is if he believed that someone had got hold of his hair-clippings and was using them to work evil against him, such is the power of mind over matter that the victim simply lay down and died.

On the other hand, it not infrequently happened that the members of a whole community lived in mortal terror of each other's magic while in actual fact none of them ever practised this dreaded magic at all. One of the most feared beings in the Trobriand Islands are the flying witches called *mulukwausi*. Now these are supposed to be women who have the power of making themselves invisible and flying through the air, the main pursuits of whom are to destroy shipwrecked sailors and feed on corpses. Now no woman will directly confess to having such powers but she will often play up to the role, for it is always an advantage to be supposed to be endowed with supernatural powers. And, moreover, being a sorceress is also a good source of income. A woman will often receive presents on the understanding that such and such a person has to be injured. When these witches attack a living man they sometimes eat some of his organs and then the man dies. It is possible to diagnose this, for such a person would quickly fail, losing his speech, his vision, sometimes suddenly being bereft of all power of movement. It is a less dangerous method to the living man when the witch, instead of eating his insides on the spot, simply removes them. She then hides them in a place known only to herself in order to have provision for a future feast. In that case there is some hope for the victim. Another woman known to be a witch is summoned by the relatives of the dying man, and is well paid by them to don her witch's form and go and search for the missing organs. If she is fortunate enough to find them they are restored to the man and his life is saved. Now the whole point of the matter is that while there is vast body of rites and spells in connection with all other sorts of magic practised on the islands, Malinowski, after two years close study, was never able to discover a single example of one rite or spell supposed to be used by these witches. "As a matter of fact", he says, "there is not the slightest doubt for me that not one single rite, not one single word of this magic, have ever existed".

Another astonishing fact is that few really primitive peoples believe there is such a thing as natural death. All deaths, and even illnesses, except minor ones, are ascribed to an enemy's magic. This disbelief in natural death is, after all, not quite so crass as it appears, for in the average primitive community conditions of life are such that very few survived the warfare, the fights and the rigours of their existence, to live to a ripe old age. Dealing with the central tribes of Australia, Spencer and Gillen state: "Amongst these natives there is no such thing as belief in natural death; however old or decrepit a man or woman may be when this takes place it is at once supposed that it has been brought about by the magic influence of some enemy and in the normal condition of the tribe the death of one individual is followed by the murder of someone else who is supposed to have been guilty of having caused the death. Not

infrequently the dying man will whisper in the ear of a railtchawa, or medicine man, the name of the man whose magic is killing him. If this be not done then there is no difficulty, by some other method, of fixing sooner or later on the guilty party".

The revenge often takes a magical turn too. A revenge party is formed. The man wears special shoes made of a thick pad of emu feathers matted together with human blood. Before he can wear such shoes he must submit to a painful operation which consists in dislocating the joint of the little toe on either foot by suddenly pulling the toe outwards. This man is accompanied by two other men and a medicine man on the expedition. When the victim is sighted, he creeps up and spears him. He then retires, the medicine man approaches the body, heals the victim removing all traces of the wound. The avenging party then goes quietly back to its own country. The victim comes to life, is completely ignorant of all that has happened, returns to his camp but in a short time sickens and dies. Now, in fact, such expeditions never take place at all, they are entirely imaginary but each group of the tribe firmly believes that the other groups do carry them out. The case is similar to the one of the flying witches of the Trobriands: all innocent but each believing the other guilty.

In some parts the death of a chief, in particular, threw all his wives, children and relatives under a cloud of suspicion of having caused his death. The magicians usually produced a culprit who was promptly executed. In Nigeria the chief's household and chief retainers had to submit to a wholesale poison ordeal to establish their innocence. This meant that everyone on whom a shred of suspicion could possibly rest had to take poison. The theory was that if a person were innocent the poison did him no harm or his stomach voided it before it had time to act. In practice things did not happen with such impartial justice, and it is related, for example, that when the famous Duke Ephraim of Duke Town died in 1835, out of fifty of his household who were obliged to submit to the poison ordeal over forty are known to have died.

In war, defeat is never ascribed to the weakness of one's own strategy, tactics or prowess, but to the superiority of the enemy's magic. There are other aspects and extensions of magic, the secretiveness about personal names for example, which could be dealt with. There are whole tracts of primitive thought such as mana and tabu which are allied to magic which I have not even mentioned, but I have said enough perhaps to show how universal, how tyrannical, and withal in their own fashion how logical are the laws of magic. It is one of the many phenomena which show us that man, no matter where we find him, living under no matter what conditions, is always fundamentally the same old Adam.

Now, whatever its origins there is no doubt, I think, that in some respects magic has been beneficial to man. It may not have been a product of man's feeling of helplessness in the face of the forces of nature, but at all events it did give him an invaluable asset in his conquest of the world and overcoming the difficulties of his environment - and that asset was *confidence*. It enhanced his opinion of himself and his own power. Granted that this confidence was baseless - the important point was that the confidence was there. And I have small doubt that we who are the heirs of early man's experimental wisdom, and inherit the fruits of his age-long trials and errors, do owe a lot to this magic which was always a reservoir of hope and confidence for our ancestors.*

*A good and well-known Irish example of 'confidence' for a successful outcome to an event resulting from such a belief is surely the practice recorded in the 16th century of the Cinél Conaill endeavouring to ensure victory in battle by having the *Cathach*, a reliquary containing a book of psalms thought to have been transcribed by their most famous ancestor, St. Colmcille himself, carried righthandwise (*deiseal* or sunwise) three times around their armies - see, *inter alia*, A.T. Lucas, *op. cit.* 1986, p.17. — E.R.