



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Magic, an appreciation

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An appreciation for magic is something that we as anthropologists probably all share. It would be hard not to. Among the canonical works of our field, ethnographies of magic stand out as some of the most memorable and seductive. In part, this has to do with the intrinsic appeal of the topic itself and its links with secrecy, danger, and power. “Magic,” enthuses Malinowski (1948: 69), “the very word seems to reveal a world of mysterious and unexpected possibilities!” But the irresistibility of magic also has to do with the unique place it has occupied in the development of our discipline, made to function as a microcosm for the irrational forces of culture that anthropologists represent. Magic is an anthropological shibboleth.

In *Magic's reason* (Jones 2017), by probing the mostly unexplored implications of magical entertainments for anthropological theory, I have sought to extend these longstanding conversations in some new directions. For this, I could imagine no better interlocutors than the participants who so generously grace this Symposium. Their ethnographic, theoretical, and historical engagements span magico-religious practices in Western Europe, Southeast Asia, Melanesia, and North Africa from the nineteenth century to the present. For me, the perspectives they offer are tremendously illuminating, pointing to a variety of ways that my arguments might be expanded and to issues that demand further clarification. I thank them for sharing with me in appreciation of magic.

Wiener and Mosko perform a tremendous service by enumerating other historical cases similar to those I already discuss, in which colonial figures, including anthropologists, employed illusionary techniques to create differential power relations. Wiener very rightly reproaches my failure to discuss Evans-Pritchard's own



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use of legerdemain to coerce confessions of trickery from Zande witch-doctors, a case analyzed in great detail by Taussig ([2003] 2016). Evans-Pritchard denigrates the witch-doctors' techniques for extracting witches' projectiles from patients as "modes of cheating . . . by sleight-of-hand" (1937: 230), and then expresses some astonishment at an apprentice witch-doctor's ability to rationalize such trickery: "He, like his colleagues, excused to me their sleight-of-hand on the grounds that it is not the pretended extraction . . . from the bodies of their patients which cures them" (ibid.: 231–32).

For Taussig, this apparent paradox can be resolved by conceptualizing tricks in terms of mimesis rather than deception. I certainly found this recommendation to be analytically fertile in approaching ritual complexes such as the 'Isawi *hadra* and the Native North American shaking tent, both of which colonial ethnographers often represented in the register of tricks-as-deception. I was less concerned with the ethnohistorical particulars of these ritual systems, however, than with that representational register itself and the way it resonates with, and draws resources from, modes of artifice in Euro-American popular culture. Zillinger introduces an example from Tylor's fieldwork among Victorian spirit mediums that is extremely provocative in this regard. When Tylor, during a spirit séance, begins to exhibit signs—legible to himself and others—of going into mediumistic trance, he writes these off as "partly consciously shamming" (quoted in Stocking 1971: 100).

For an anthropologist like Tylor, convictions about the inherent insincerity of magic run so deep that he appears to respond to his own experience of trance with self-accusations of trickery. As Zillinger points out, this kind of divided consciousness is not at all inconsistent with Tylor's theory of primitive magicians' psychology, but it is still remarkable. One of the key insights Zillinger raises is that mediumship often sets itself up as an experimental system designed to test the very possibility of magical communication and adjudicate differences between signal and noise (cf. Rennesson, Grimaud, and Césard 2012); it is a form of what Lemon (2017) calls "phatic expertise." Capable of accommodating roles ranging from devout believer to intransigent skeptic, the participation framework of mediumistic magic often leaves a privileged place for those in between extremes, such as modern-day British ghost hunters, for whom *doubt* facilitates flirtations with mediumism (Hanks 2016). This mediumistic receptiveness to inchoate participation mirrors a receptiveness to inchoate signals—one that Tylor finds deeply unsettling.

Although he was unable to make a formal contribution to this forum, Michael Houseman, in a personal communication, asked me to reflect on another closely related kind of anthropological uneasiness that he registers in a recent article on New Age and Neo-pagan ritual (Houseman 2016). As a participant observer, Houseman initially balks at the *kitschiness* of these contrived rituals, but then finds a way to theoretically redeem it. A deliberate aesthetic of kitsch is directly connected with the efficacy of these magical rites, creating a kind of "refraction," as Houseman puts it, that allows participants to be simultaneously engrossed in the seriousness of their performance and self-reflexive about its silliness. Kitsch becomes a way for these post-Enlightenment subjects (much like Hanks' ghost hunters) to engage with the kinds of magical potentiality that Tylor experienced without rushing to contain or curtail it through the register of deception. If the artifice is inadequately enchanting, then the ritual's significance must lie elsewhere.

Houseman asks how these contemporary Western experiences of reflexively believing relate to the self-reflexivity I describe in connection with modern entertainment magic. As at least a partial response, I note that, like the French illusionists I write about in *Magic's reason*, Houseman's postmodern pagans appear to have a potent ethnographic imaginary. Their rituals simulate nonmodern and/or non-Western prototypes drawn, for instance, from ethnographic representations of shamanism. Kitschiness-in-simulation is a way of resisting self-deception by opening up inner space for the cultivation of sincere, authentic intentions—a perspective similar to Rao's (2016) account of a “media Hinduism” that readily embraces religious mediation in any form, however high-tech or however kitschy. Adding credence to Houseman's findings, I furthermore note that, despite modern magic's close association with disenchantment, I still encountered at least a few French illusionists who were perfectly at home with New Age conceptions of magic.

Neo-pagan ritual magicians and modern entertainment magicians make anthropologically inflected arguments about “traditional” magical practices recorded in the annals of ethnography. But Mosko raises a significant point: in no way should it be assumed, absent detailed ethnohistorical evidence, that the magico-religious practices observed by European chroniclers and ethnographers necessarily preceded Western influences, at least not in the forms passed down to us. To his illustrative examples from Melanesia, I would add another from Native North America. As Wolf (1995) shows, an infusion of wealth from the European fur trade dramatically invigorated the Northwest Coast “culture of display” (Glass 2008: 14), notable for its elaboration of proprietary performative marvels, including illusionistic special effects and transformation masks (fig. 1). Ethnographic exhibitions also elicited and amplified performative display.



Figure 1: Kwakwaka'wakw raven-to-human transformation mask, shown with internal face revealed. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia (CC BY-NC-ND 2.5 CA).

In 1904, British-Canadian ethnologist Charles Newcombe brought Kwakwaka'wakw performers, including Charley Nowell and Bob Harris, to the St. Louis World's Fair. Nowell recounts that, for a special performance for "all the big people of the Fair" (Ford [1941] 1996: 186), he and Harris devised an extraordinary magic effect—what illusionists would call a "grand illusion." The Kwakwaka'wakw had befriended Ota Benga, a Congolese Pygmy also on display at the Fair, whose secret collaboration they enlisted. Using animal bones and mutton flesh, Harris manufactured a life-sized and life-like replica of Benga, featuring a moving mouth, a shrieking noisemaker, and a concealed bladder of blood. During a performance of the Kwakwaka'wakw "cannibal dance," Harris flew into a rage and snatched the real Benga from the crowd. Carrying him behind a screen, he emerged from the other side holding the substituted dummy, which he threw to the ground and viciously attacked before terrified spectators. As Harris gnawed at its neck, ripping away strips of flesh, the dummy shrieked and oozed blood. Afterward, Nowell says, "Dr. Newcombe never came near us, he was so scared at what Bob Harris had done. That was a murder he said; that means he is going to be hanged" (188). The Kwakwaka'wakw, of course, ultimately performed a ritual to "revive" Benga.

Mosko's remarks suggest one way of beginning to read this remarkable story of indigenous performers contriving illusionary artifice to gull Euro-American spectators. In Nowell's narrative, it is the credulity of the anthropologist about Indian savagery that sets him up to fall for phony cannibalism. The anthropologist and the other "big people" are taken in by a deceptive performance of "tradition" that we can now better understand through the lens of indigenous modernity. Here, that modernity takes the form of a supremely reflexive indigenous illusionism that inserts Kwakwaka'wakw special effects wizardry into new contexts. The cannibal act is striking not just for its syncretism, but also for the technical sophistication of trickery that encompasses elaborate gimmicks, ingenious misdirection, and carefully calculated stagecraft—not to mention South-South collaboration between colonial subalterns, who use magic to upend the civilizational hierarchies of the World's Fair.

Beyond these demonstrations of the historicity of magical systems, Wiener raises other questions about genealogies of anthropological theory. She rightly points out that invidious contrasts between Enlightenment rationality and nonmodern credulity had crystallized in debates about fetishism before magic had really gotten off the ground as an anthropological concern (see Morris, Leonard, and de Brosses 2017). Mosko points to a related elision in *Magic's reason* that further reveals some of my underlying assumptions. He shows that Malinowski, in an effort to reconcile Trobriand magic with scientific attitudes, may have fundamentally misrecognized its religious underpinnings. Have I made a similar mistake in emphasizing a dualistic relationship between magic and science (and a supervening dialectic of enchantment and disenchantment) while invoking religion only fleetingly?

I suspect that Mosko and I actually may be on a similar wavelength. I have long held the suspicion that placing magic, science, and religion in what Malinowski calls a "three-cornered constellation" (1948: 89) imposes a logic of relatedness that tends to distort the elements it connects. The author who has most influenced my thinking about this is not an anthropologist, but a historian—medievalist

Richard Kieckhefer. In his brilliant survey *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Kieckhefer (2000) shows that medieval Europeans would not have conceptualized magic in respect to science and religion, as modern anthropologists are apt to do, but rather would have drawn distinctions between “demonic magic” (which relates to what would become religion) and “natural magic” (which relates to what would become science). They also clearly recognized a category of “performative magic that would arouse wonder at the magician’s virtuosity” (ibid.: 91).

What I like about this account is the way Kieckhefer parses the polysemy of “magic,” a term that consistently causes such confusion, making a place for entertainment alongside its other valences. Introducing entertainment magic into perspectives on magic writ large offers a powerful corrective for a persistent overemphasis on problems of knowledge and belief: often people do things just for fun. Moreover, Kieckhefer highlights the permeability of these categories in medieval culture, arguing that historians cannot easily classify particular instances of medieval magic as religious ritual, scientific experiment, or playful spectacle—because the people involved were so often conflicted about these distinctions. In thinking about the destiny of the concept of “magic” in modern European discourses such as anthropology, I have found it useful to keep this medieval etymology in mind. One of the things I try to establish is that the linkages with science and religion that anthropological theory imposes culturally distort the polyvalence that I think Western magic retains (at least in lay parlance) from its medieval roots.

Following Kieckhefer, I might propose a distinction between *ritualistic*, *empiric*, and *ludic* approaches to magic, which are dynamically interrelated (fig. 2). Moving away from models positing dialectical oscillations between mutually exclusive values of enchantment and disenchantment toward more complicated patterns of oscillation between several values of shifting weight might get us closer to an image of the way individual and group orientations can change during magical acts and within magical systems. Such a trialectic generates unpredictable figures of involution, which can be likened to harmograms produced by a stylus attached to the multiple, interconnected pendula of harmonographs (fig. 3). These coupled pendula, swinging between ludic and empiric, empiric and ritualistic, ritualistic and ludic poles, describe cultural patterns much more complicated, and beautiful, than dichotomous theories of magic typically allow for.

This path of reconceptualizing magic has profound implications for the “three-cornered constellation” more broadly. Crucially, this same range of ritualistic, empiric, and ludic dispositions seems manifest not only in magic, but in science and religion as well. Science can be a form of play (e.g., Dippel 2017) or an article of faith (e.g., Farman 2012), just as easily as a rationalized pursuit of knowledge (although that is what it most typically signifies). Religion can be a mode of rational inquiry (e.g., Elisha 2008) or light-hearted entertainment (e.g., Bielo 2015) just as easily as a practice of solemn worship (although that is what it most typically signifies). Reinserting ludic elements into theoretical debates about magic thus has ripple effects that unsettle simple commensuration between magic, science, and religion by revealing a dynamic internal differentiation within these respective experiential systems, and by creating a theoretical bulwark against reductionist accounts of, say, science and the epitome of disenchanted rationality.

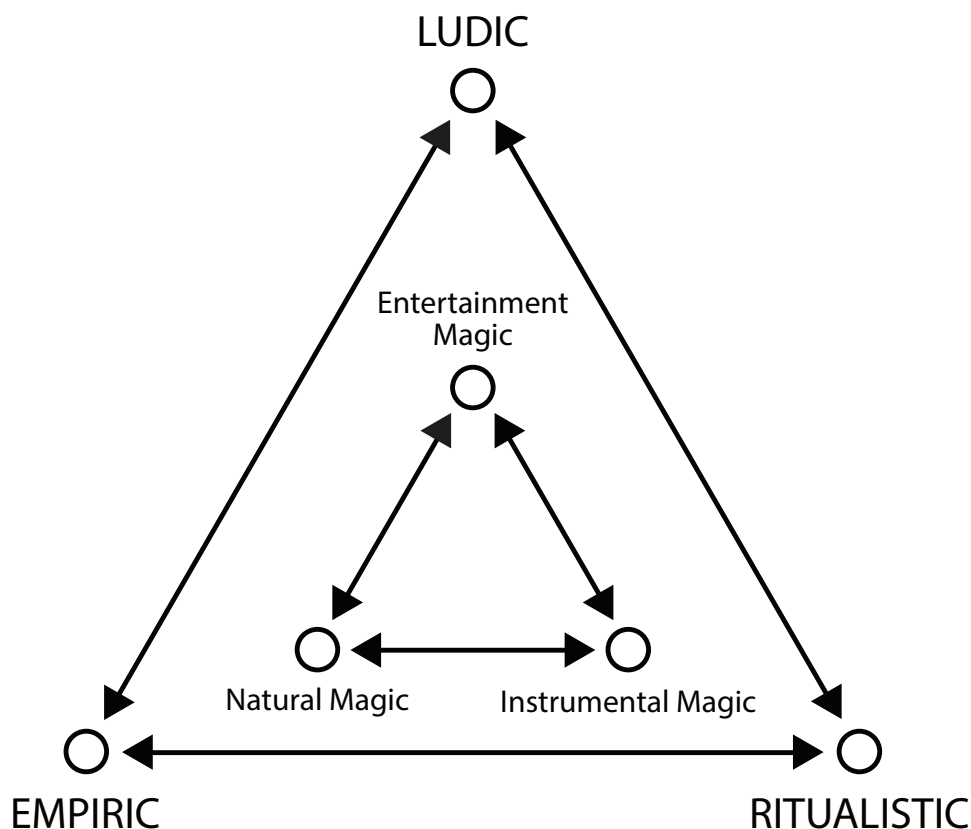


Figure 2

Of all the respondents, Luhrmann raises the most disconcerting question. Reprising the opposition between social construction and positivistic science that has proven so troublesome for science and technology studies (Lynch 2016), she questions whether examining the cultural and historical conditions in which the anthropology of magic emerged adds anything of value to its hoary achievements and ongoing ambitions, which she sees as increasingly linked to cognitive science. Frankly, I have wondered the same thing myself: At what point does rehashing anthropology's colonial legacy devolve into masochistic self-flagellation, or poring over genealogies of terminological minutiae into self-indulgent navel gazing? Still, to be clear, I never argue that anthropologists should abandon research on instrumental magic because some of what has impelled Euro-American anthropology's fixation on magico-religious practices can be historically traced to the kinds of disenchantment popularized and promulgated by Western illusionists. Instead, what I argue is that, in neglecting those forms of magic, anthropologists risk treating their own position as somehow a-cultural, when it manifestly is not. I agree entirely that anthropological research on instrumental magic has yielded very real insights into the ordered disorderliness of the human mind, but I think that to fully assimilate those insights, we need to extend them to encompass anthropology itself as—let's face it—a cultural practice with cultural consequences that outstrip narrow disciplinary control.

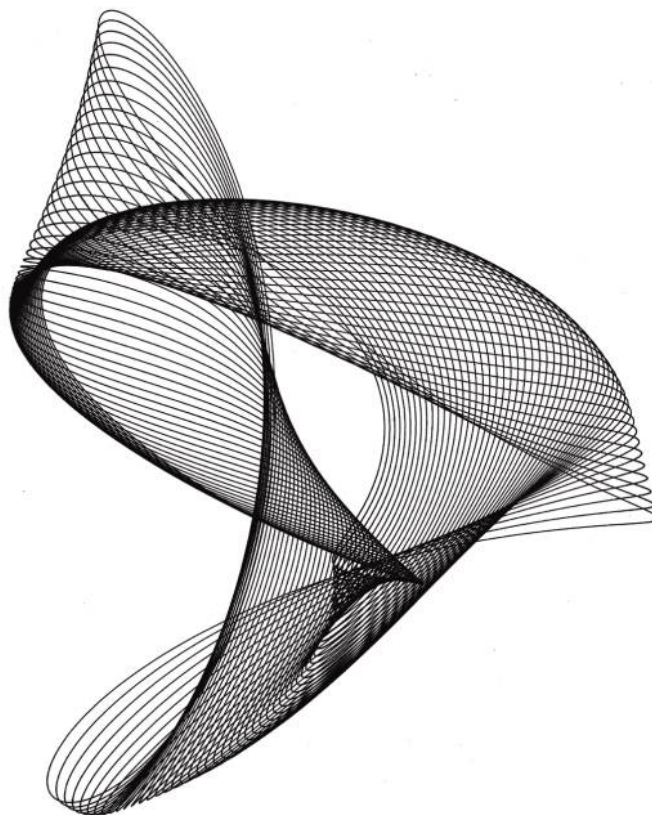


Figure 3: Harmonograph drawing by Steve Graser. Courtesy of the artist.

In *The savage mind*, Lévi-Strauss distinguishes between sciences of the concrete, which, like magic, work through signs, and sciences of the abstract, which, like anthropology, work through concepts. “One way . . . in which signs can be opposed to concepts,” he writes, “is that whereas concepts aim to be wholly transparent with respect to reality, signs allow and even require the interposing and incorporation of a certain amount of human culture into reality” (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 20). I hope my analysis reveals that this is a false dichotomy: in practice, abstract concepts such as “magic” exhibit a surplus of semiotic potential comparable to concrete signifiers and, consequently, a comparable degree of cultural embeddedness. This is why analogical reasoning offers such a valuable lens into the magical cultures that anthropologists study—consider the cross-cultural analogies Moroccan trance mediums use to explain what they do to Zillinger—and into the culture of magic that anthropologists have created.

Any serious appreciation of magic must embrace this fact.

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