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### The Anthropology of Magic

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## Book Review

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# The Anthropology of Magic

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**Susan Greenwood**

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Berg, 2009  
Pb, 160 pp. ISBN 978-1-84520-670-3

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## Reviewed by Miguel Farias

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Contemporary anthropologists feel uncomfortable about magic—and there are good reasons for this. Early theorists on the topic, from Comte to Frazer, regarded it as a primitive stage of thinking, something that belonged to less “advanced” societies. Reacting against this colonialist mindset, more recent generations of anthropologists have criticized and blurred the distinction between religion and magic; magic, after all, tended to be the religion of the other. But there are also more private reasons for this discomfort, reasons that are shared by other social scientists: for many of us, it would be less embarrassing to give a lecture naked in front of one’s peers than to be pegged with the view that magic could be anything other than a social and psychic fabrication. At academic meetings, I have witnessed rare occasions where unruly questioners did their best to tempt out the speaker’s real view on magical phenomena. Some years ago, at a symposium on Afro-Brazilian religions held at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, a professor of sociology of religion was asked: “Have you ever considered the possibility there may *actually* be spirits possessing the people who take part in these rituals? And if that were true, wouldn’t you have to reconsider your psychosocial explanations of the phenomenon?” The speaker evaded the question. “That’s not the type of question I’m dealing with; I’m not a theologian.”

But, despite this discomfort, magic seems to be enjoying a renaissance. Contemporary Paganism is growing—we are flooded by popular films and books on magic, including bestsellers like *The Secret* or *The Celestine Prophecy* that market it as “the law of attraction”—while psychological

research has uncovered that magic is a culturally pervasive mode of thinking in children and adults alike. A number of studies have shown that we are particularly prone to it when confronted with stress and uncertainty. In one such study, carried out by Keinan during the 1991 Gulf War, it was found that people were more inclined to think magically when they lived in a city with greater probability of being hit by missiles. But while social-psychological accounts provide us with interesting explanations for the functions of magic, they remove us from its phenomenology. Can we think about magic in ways which address the experience of those who practice and think magically without entirely reducing it to a group or psychological phenomenon?

Susan Greenwood, lauded in her book blurb as a scholar and practitioner of magic, attempts such a non-reductionist interpretation. Or, at least, she promises to attempt it. In the first part of the book she critically reviews various anthropological theories, including the work of Fraser, Lévi-Bruhl, Evans-Pritchard, and Tambiah, and also mentioning more briefly the writings of Lévi-Strauss, Edith Turner, Horton, and Luhrman. Greenwood has some respect for Turner's more experiential orientation, but treats other approaches as either reductionist or incomplete. Her argument is straightforward: most theories of magic attempt to contrast or compare it with logical thinking and science, thereby failing to address what is specific about magic as an experiential and imaginative mode of thought. However, when she finally gets to deliver her own approach—and one has to wait until the final two chapters for this—she sketches a timid, almost frail, theory of magic.

Greenwood's characterization of magic feels too immaterial, almost ethereal, as if it were an open-ended exploration of oneself rather than a way of relating to reality—not to mention manipulating it. Her proposal is that magic involves experiencing instead of believing (like religion) or rationalizing (like science). Our Western tradition, rooted in the Enlightenment and individualism, tells us that we must engage with the world intellectually, thus impoverishing our capacity to feel, imagine, and experience. But, Greenwood urges, we need the language of imagination, of *mythos*, too—and it can work alongside that of *logos*. She pushes this imaginative dimension as an explanation of magic to the point of dismissing the question of its reality:

It might appear to some people that the two orientations of the analytical mode and the participatory, magical mode are mutually incompatible; however, in practice, I have found that it is entirely possible to accommodate both aspects within a broader stream of awareness and consciousness... So the question of the reality or nonreality of spirits appears to be unreasonable. At worst, it legitimises a denial of the experience of magic, and at best, it is a distraction from the further examination of this aspect of human awareness. The best way forward to start to feel this aspect of consciousness is to take the phenomenological perspective of acting "as if"—to bracket disbelief—and simply *experience*.

This is plainly a psychological explanation, one that envisages magic as an element within our imaginative/feeling mind. That humans have a dual way of perceiving the

world, one side rational and one that feels, is widely established in cognitive psychology and is usually addressed as dual processing theory. Within this framework magical and religious thinking are usually considered part of the feeling and imaginative aspect of our minds. So, Greenwood's proposal is not a new one, while she may herself become guilty of the reductionism she initially criticized, since she is framing magic as no more than an innate capacity for imaginative feeling.

This reductionism is apparent in one passage where Greenwood describes the experience of her mentor, Jo, at a shamanic workshop. While in an altered state of consciousness, she has a vision of a Mongolian man who told her "I am you and you are me and now we are together." People at the workshop thought that a spirit had possessed her but Jo claims that this was not the case; the spirit was just an aspect of herself. This psychologized interpretation is taken for granted by Greenwood; more than that, it informs her basic understanding of magic. This makes me wonder: what kind of magic is Greenwood actually referring to? It seems removed from the experiences of most people who practice it. They do not do it for the sake of experiencing an altered state of mind, or to find one's inner self, but for very practical reasons: to improve a relationship, to cure an illness, to ask for a blessing, to yield good crops, to find a better job. For these people, there is no question that the world of magical powers and spirits is real. By contrast, Greenwood's depiction is subjective and tamed, almost like a packaged magic for secularized Anglicans.

There is one other aspect of her approach I found problematic. In her

attempt to place magic as part of our feeling/imaginative capacity, she is dismissive of theories that highlight the existence of commonalities between magical and scientific thinking. Authors like Horton have argued that magic uses causal reasoning; it provides explanations for a variety of phenomena and guidelines on how to promote certain events. Greenwood, on the other hand, proposes that magic relies on analogical thinking and a sense of mystical participation, while science is characterized by logical thinking and causality. But this is not necessarily so. A felt sense of participation does not exclude a search for causality: quite the contrary. A spell, a ritual, or a special object can carry *both* a sense of invisible connectedness *and* a causal intention or interpretation of the world. Magic, even when stripped to the experiential dimension that recurs throughout Greenwood's book, is characterized by a web of *causal* connections. Her own personal accounts illustrate it. In one of them, she describes her special connection to a horse and how its death allowed for an exploration of her emotional state; later, in a shamanic workshop, she again finds a connection to this horse and makes a rattle to facilitate this link. So, the horse's death led to a personal exploration and the rattle activates the horse's presence. What is this if not causal reasoning?

Greenwood's stout attempt to divide the waters of science and magic is exaggerated. This is almost certainly prompted by a fear that the recognition of any commonality between them will lead to a comparison where magic is perceived, almost inevitably, as a form of primitive or faulty science. But there are other ways of looking at

this relationship, of which two spring to mind. First, our minds are not always unequivocal; we are able to give more than one explanation to the same occurrence. In my own research I have looked at how individuals can hold both naturalistic and magical explanations of a single event. The magical explanation is often associated with an affective component while the naturalistic one tends to be logical, meaning that magical thinking, though allowing for causal reasoning, is still processed differently.

A second, and more daring, way of considering this relationship was reported to me by a colleague who was doing research on contemporary Paganism. When interviewing an individual who was both a Pagan and a scientist, he asked about the use of magic to aid the removal of a past partner from his mind. The scientist suggested using a magical-related task that consisted of writing down what attracted him to this person, what he saw as a negative

force in that attraction, how this woman seemed to fulfill his needs, and what was her less desirable side. My colleague, somewhat disappointed, commented that those suggestions sounded quite like psychology or psychoanalysis. To this, the Pagan answered: "Actually, it is psychology that may be couched in magic, rather than the other way around."

I wish Greenwood's book had a more thought-provoking edge to it and that, instead of a timid defense of magic as a form of imaginary-experiential consciousness, she had the ambition to challenge us with something more far-reaching. As the anecdote of the Pagan/scientist suggest, we do not know how much of our belief in science may turn out to be magical. There is plenty of evidence for that hidden under the nebulous concept of the "placebo effect." Meanwhile, *The Anthropology of Magic* works as a popular introduction to its subject, but no more than that.