

ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION, MAGIC, AND WITCHCRAFT

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Magic and Divination

When most Americans hear the word *magic*, they most likely picture a rabbit being pulled out of a hat or someone on television making an elephant disappear. What is popularly called *magic* we shall call *illusion*, since magic in this sense refers to acts that rely on some sort of trickery and deception. Entertainers in our culture who perform such illusions freely admit that they are manipulating not the supernatural world, but rather human perception. *Magic*, as anthropologists use the term, refers to activities, usually rituals, by which a person can compel the supernatural to behave in certain ways. Closely related to magic are ways of gaining information about the unknown, be it what will happen in the future, what is happening in some faraway place, or the cause of an illness. These techniques are aspects of divination.

Magic and Religion

Magic refers to methods that somehow interface with the supernatural and by which people can bring about particular outcomes. A **magician** is usually a worker in the kind of magic that is on the whole public and good, whereas a **sorcerer** is generally considered an evil figure, one who deals in matters that his or her clients would rather keep secret and one whose work may be downright antisocial. Of course, many other religious specialists, such as healers, use magic in their activities. Sometimes the term *magician* is not used because it implies that there are specialists in magic when in fact most, if not all, members of the community may be well versed in how to do magic.

Early anthropologists were quite ethnocentric when it came to the study of magic. Edward Tylor, who discussed magic in his book *Primitive Cultures*, published in 1871, wrote that magic is a logical way of thinking. The problem is that the logic is based on bad premises. Tylor believed that in tribal cultures the magician takes the same approach as a scientist, but the magician makes a mistake because he assumes a causal relationship that does not exist simply because things appear to be similar.

In addition, Tylor did not include magic in the realm of religion because no spirits are involved, which he considered necessary for his definition of religion. Today anthropologists consider magic to be religious because it is associated with supernatural mechanisms, but this has not always been the case. Earlier anthropologists and some contemporary ones see magic as a separate category from religion.

James Frazer, like Tylor, believed that magic was a pseudo-science, based on direct action. Frazer was a part of the evolutionary school (see Chapter 1) and thought that magic was an early stage that would be replaced by religion. Religion was seen as different from magic because it is based on persuasion of supernatural beings rather than manipulation of supernatural forces. Some evolutionary school thinkers believed that ultimately religion itself would give way to science. Of course, none of this has happened; in most societies magic, religion, and science coexist.

Émile Durkheim (see Chapter 1) also thought that magic could be distinguished from religion, but he focused on the social context. Unlike religious rituals that tend to involve the whole of the community, magic is often centered on the needs and desires of an individual. A farmer wants rain, a young man wants a wife, a woman needs a cure for her illness. In contrast to religious rituals that are carried out for the good of the community, magic is directed at very practical ends as articulated by an individual. Durkheim wrote, "In all history, we do not find a single religion without a church. . . . There is no church of magic."¹ However, generalizations are just that. Magic is frequently used in communitywide public rituals to bring rain or defend the community against an enemy.

Another related difference is seen in the purpose of the magic or religious ritual. Religion is seen as "an end in itself." Malinowski wrote: "While in the magical act the underlying idea and aim is always clear, straightforward, and definite, in the religious ceremony there is no purpose directed toward a subsequent event."² Some nonmagical rituals certainly have very specific goals—coming-of-age ceremonies, for example—but many rituals are more generalized, especially social rites of intensification.

The issue of whether or not magic is part of religion or a separate category altogether is largely a function of how religion itself is defined (see Chapter 1). Given the definition that we are using in this book—that religion is the domain of human interactions with the sacred supernatural—magic would be included.

Magic and Science

In industrial societies science provides techniques for dealing with difficult and adverse situations. For example, if someone falls ill, science may provide an explanation (e.g., a bacterial infection) and a course of action to combat the illness (e.g., take an antibiotic).

All peoples have rational means for dealing with difficult and potentially dangerous situations. Although some anthropologists have labeled such activities *science*, it is not science as we use the term in the industrial world. In the scientific community, science is a methodology for coming to an understanding of our

world through objective observations, experimentation, and the development of **hypotheses** and **theories**.

Science deals only with **empirical** observations, that is, observations that are made through our senses, such as using vision to examine animal tissue under a microscope. Scientific conclusions also must be **testable**. This means that scholars must be able to develop new experiments and make new observations that will test the validity of a conclusion with the very real possibility that the hypothesis may be false. However, all peoples make detailed observations about their world and sometimes manipulate objects in their environment in order to come to some understanding of their world. All peoples have systems of technology that use rational and practical methods to achieve certain objectives.

As an example, consider a subsistence farmer who is growing crops to feed his family. A lot is riding on his success. Failure to produce an adequate crop could lead to malnutrition or starvation for his family. A subsistence farmer is very knowledgeable about his craft. He is familiar with various types of soils, knows the best time to plant, and knows how to build a fence to keep out wild animals.

However, no matter how carefully and skillfully the farmer performs his task or lives his life, bad things can and do happen. Rains might fail to come, or an infestation of insect pests might destroy his plants. He probably wonders, "Why is this happening to me? What can I do to prevent these things from happening?" To answer these questions, the farmer might turn to religious ritual to invoke the influence of a deity. Perhaps he will present an offering to a god and ask the god to help, perhaps to bring rain. Or he might build a small spirit house in the corner of his field and, by presenting the spirit with food offerings, try to persuade the spirit to take up residence and guard the fields. However, these activities depend on the good will of the god or spirit, who might or might not be inclined to do as the farmer asks.

Another approach is to somehow control the situation directly. Perhaps there is a way in which our farmer can connect to the supernatural world and bring about a desired end. This is what we mean by magic. Magic consists of activities, usually rituals, by which the farmer can automatically produce certain results, such as rain for his crop. There is no god or spirit to convince to help him. All the farmer needs is knowledge of how to perform the magic, and the result—rain or protection from wild animals—will happen.

Magic in the Trobriand Islands

In this section we will discuss the magic of Trobriand Islanders, who live off the western coast of New Guinea, as a means of illustrating basic concepts of magic and magical rituals. This will include magical knowledge, how magic is learned, magical rituals, and the functions that magic serves.

Magical Knowledge

Many peoples do not distinguish in practice between technological knowledge and magical knowledge. The goals of both are very much the same, and one would

be ill advised to pay attention to one without paying attention to the other. Just as the farmer would be foolish not to build a fence around his plot to keep out wild animals, he would be equally foolish not to perform the appropriate magical ritual. Both are seen as essential for the successful completion of the task at hand.

The Trobriand Islanders distinguish among three types of knowledge. First there is knowledge of things in the everyday world, which is shared by all or a large group of adult members of the society. This is what a child learns from his or her parents and may be appropriate to one or the other gender. For example, boys might learn how to garden, and girls might learn how to weave mats. This is put to use in the everyday activities that are a part of the normal pattern of living.

A second form of knowledge is more specialized and is shared with a limited number of individuals. This includes expert knowledge that is necessary for task specializations, such as sailing or woodcarving. This form also includes knowledge of particular magical rituals that tend to be learned by many members of the society.

The highest level includes knowledge of the most complex and valued technological skills, such as canoe building, as well as knowledge of myths, songs, and dances. These skills are important to the community, and a person who has such skills is called *tokabitam*, "man with knowledge." This level of knowledge includes knowledge of important magic, such as rain magic and garden magic. This knowledge is of great importance to the community, and the relatively few people who possess such knowledge are very important people, in terms of both prestige and wealth, because the services of such people are paid for.

Learning Magic

Although many forms of magic are well known among adult members of a community, much magical lore is the private property of individuals. The most common way to obtain magic is to learn it from one's parents, grandparents, or other kin. Thus certain types of magic frequently are associated with particular family lines. Sometimes the magic is owned by a more remote relative or a nonrelative. In this case the person who desires the magic will purchase it from its owner.

A Trobriand Islander who wants to learn particular magic will present a series of gifts over time to the owner as a way of convincing the individual to bestow that knowledge. It is to the advantage of the owner of the magic to spread the learning process over a long period of time, thus maximizing the amount of gifts given. Sometimes the owner dies before all of the magic has been transferred to the student. In such cases the magic might not be effective because the transfer of the magic is incomplete.

Sometimes the owner of the magic dies before beginning the transfer process or, for some reason, does not want to share the knowledge. This is how magic disappears from the community. For example, Malinowski, who studied the Trobriand Islanders between 1915 and 1918, provided details of particular garden magic (see Figure 6.1). This magic disappeared because it was not passed on to the next generation. However, garden magic is very important, and influential members of the community were able to purchase different garden magic from people's



FIGURE 6.1 *Trobriand Island Garden Magic.* Tokunaya performs a magic ritual in a yam garden on the Trobriand Islands.

living on islands to the south. Today many young men travel to the capital of Papua New Guinea to find work. After several years they return, bringing gifts of manufactured goods as well as magic that was purchased from tribes living on the large island.

Magical Ritual

A key component of a magical act is the words that are spoken—the **spell**. The spell is often an oral text that is transmitted without change from generation to generation. The slightest deviation from its traditional form would invalidate the magic. Because spells usually are passed down unchanged, they often come to be recited in an archaic form of the language and might include words that no longer have meaning or, if the magic comes from a different cultural group, may even be spoken in a foreign language. In the Trobriand Islands the ritual must be performed exactly. The slightest slip in the ritual, such as a minute omission in its performance or a seemingly insignificant change in its sequence, invalidates the magic. This is not the case in all societies. Among the Azande of the Sudan, for example, magical rituals are variable, and the spell is unformulated.

Magical rituals usually contain material objects that are manipulated in set ways. Sometimes a special material or object is required for the magic to work; at other times familiar objects are manipulated. Another aspect of ritual is the condition of the performer and the conditions of the ritual. Rituals can often be performed only at special places and at special times. The performer must often observe certain restrictions, such as abstention from sexual intercourse and avoidance of certain foods (see Box 6.1).

Magic involves the direct manipulation of the supernatural. There is a sense of control. If one performs the ritual correctly, one will automatically obtain the desired result. The magician does not have to convince a deity to bring about the result. Magic compels the supernatural to bend to the person's wishes, and success is seen as inevitable (provided one knows the right formula). Other religious rituals assume that supernatural powers are free agents that might or might not grant requests. (In many societies gods can be manipulated, bribed, or tricked but not controlled.)

The Function of Magic

Malinowski noted that Trobriand Islanders did not use magic in lagoon fishing because it is not dangerous. However, open-sea fishing is dangerous and is accompanied by extensive rituals designed to assure safety and success. He writes: "We do not find magic wherever the pursuit is certain, reliable, and well under the control of rational methods and technological processes. Further, we find magic where the element of danger is conspicuous."³

However, Annette Weiner notes that although lagoon fishing is relatively safe, there are other reasons to perform magic in the lagoon environment. She writes: "They 'turn' to magic, not out of psychological distress over a physical environment out of control, but when it is essential that they produce a large catch that must be used for an important exchange that has social and political consequences. To control the actions of the wind and the fish is ultimately proof of one's ability to control an exchange, thereby providing a measure of control over others."⁴

A similar connection between magic and uncertainty can be found in athletics. Of course, skill and practice play a major role in athletic prowess, but poor athletes sometimes do exceptionally well, while great athletes will hit a patch of "bad luck." Since much is riding on performance, athletes frequently attempt to control "luck" through magical behavior.

Anthropologist and former professional baseball player George Gmelch describes magical behavior among athletes.⁵

On each pitching day for the first three months of a winning season, Dennis Grossini, a pitcher on the Detroit Tiger farm team, arose from bed at exactly 10:00 A.M. At 1:00 P.M. he went to the nearest restaurant for two glasses of ice tea and a tuna fish sandwich. Although the afternoon was free, he changed into the sweat-shirt and supporter he wore during his last winning game, and one hour before the game he chewed a wad of Beech-Nut chewing tobacco. After each pitch during the

BOX 6.1 • *Trobriand Island Magic*

Bronislaw Malinowski described the role of magic in the building of a canoe among the Trobriand Islanders. The tree that is to become the canoe is found in the inland forest. The tree is cut down, and the bark is removed; men come out to pull the log from the forest to the village. Of course, it is a practical matter to make the log as light as possible, so the branches are removed, and the log is cut to the appropriate length.

In addition, the proper magic is performed to further reduce the weight of the log. A piece of dry banana leaf is put on top of the log. The builder beats the log with a bunch of dry *lalang* grass and says, "Come down, come down, defilement by contact with excrement! Come down, defilement by contact with refuse! Come down, heaviness! Come down, rot! Come down fungus!"^a The heaviness and slowness, due to all these magical causes, are drawn out of the log. This bunch of grass is then ritually thrown away. This is the heavy bunch—it takes into it the heaviness of the log.

Another bunch of *lalang* grass, seared and dry, is beaten against the log. This is the light bunch, which imparts lightness into the log and speed to the canoe. The builder says, "I lash you, O tree; the tree flies; the tree becomes like a breath of wind; the tree becomes like a butterfly; the tree becomes like a cotton seed fluff."^b

Malinowski also described garden magic.^c Despite all the knowledge, skills, and hard work that are put into gardening, bad things can happen. Rain might fail to come, or insect pests might destroy a crop. To deal with these seemingly uncontrollable problems, the farmer turns to magic.

In farming, good fertility and a good crop are attributed to the skill and knowledge of the farmer and the superiority of his magic. There is a clear distinction between work that must be performed manually and work performed through magic.

Together, they make up a complex gardening system.

The Trobriand Islanders recognize many types of soils; they discriminate between a many varieties of yams; they build fences to keep out pigs. "All these practical devices they handle rationally and according to sound empirical rules."^d The islanders are very clear about what tasks are considered work and what are considered magic. The construction of a spirit house is strictly magic, but weeding is work. Work and knowledge are essential to the success of a garden. Good luck, a better-than-expected result, is confirmation of the strength of the magic; bad luck, a poor crop, points out a deficiency in the magic.

Malinowski describes many garden rituals. For example, this is part of a ritual that occurs before a field is cleared of brush: In the morning the men gather together around the magician, a religious specialist, who fasts until the completion of the ritual. The men, dressed and bodies painted for the special occasion, pick up their axes, which have been magically prepared. They march to the garden, where the magician takes his hereditary wand of office in his left hand and his axe in his right hand and enters the garden. He cuts a small sapling and recites a spell:^e

This is our bad wood, O ancestral spirits!
O bush-pig, who fightest, O bush-pig from
the great stone in the *rayboag*, O bush-pig
of the garden stakes, O bush-pig drawn by
evil smells, O bush-pig of the narrow face,
O bush-pig of the ugly countenance, O
fierce bush-pig. Thy sail, O bush-pig, is in
thy ear, thy steering-oar is in thy tail. I kick
thee from behind, I despatch thee. Go
away. Go to Ulawola. Return whence you
have come. It burns your eyes, it turns
your stomach.

The sapling, which is then thrown into the forest, stands for evil influences and the bush-pig, which causes damage by digging

up gardens. This ritual is followed by other rituals, creating a cycle of rituals that parallels the work that must be accomplished to secure a bountiful harvest.

^aB. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York: Dutton, 1961), p. 129.

^bB. Malinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

^cB. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (New York: Dover, 1978), first published in 1935.

^d*Ibid.*, p. 77.

^e*Ibid.*, p. 100.

game he touched the letters on his uniform and straightened his cap after each ball. Before the start of each inning he replaced the pitcher's rosin bag next to the spot where it was the inning before. And after every inning in which he gave up a run, he washed his hands.

When asked which part of the ritual was most important, he said, "You can't really tell what's most important so it all becomes important. I'd be afraid to change anything. As long as I'm winning, I do everything the same."

Where do these ritual behaviors come from? They come from what appears to be an association between an activity and a result. Most people do not believe in coincidence. The juxtaposition of a behavior with a desired result—the eating of a tuna sandwich before a game in which the pitcher pitches a perfect game, for example—is seen in terms of one causing the other. The pitcher will from that point on religiously eat a tuna sandwich before each game as a method of ensuring success. Gmelch notes that such rituals are found most frequently in those areas that are most difficult to control and are therefore most influenced by random fluctuations of success, such as pitching. This behavior among baseball players closely resembles the behavior of Trobriand Islanders engaging in fishing or trading voyages on the open ocean.

Rules of Magic

Magic does tend to follow certain principles. These were first described by James Frazer in his book *The Golden Bough* originally published in 1890. Frazer articulated the **Law of Sympathy**, which states that magic depends on the apparent association or agreement between things. There are two parts to the Law of Sympathy. The first is the **Law of Similarity**, which states that things that are alike are the same. The second is the **Law of Contagion**, which states that things that were once in contact continue to be connected after the connection is severed. The Law of Similarity gives rise to **homeopathic**, or **imitative magic**, and the Law of Contagion give rise to **contagious magic**.

Homeopathic Magic

Homeopathic or imitative magic assumes that there is a causal relationship between things that appear to be similar. The similarity can be physical or behavioral. The most familiar kind of homeopathic magic is **image magic**. This is the practice of making an image to represent a living person, who can then be killed or injured through doing things to the image, such as sticking pins into the image or burning it. The first may cause pain in the body of the victim that corresponds to the place on the image where the pin was stuck; burning the image might bring about a high fever. Animals drawn on the walls of Paleolithic caves with arrows through them might be an example of image magic. Here the artist is creating the hunt in art. Depicting a successful hunt will bring about a similar outcome in the real hunt.

There are many examples of behaviors that imitate a desired end, causing the end to occur. Sometimes these are found embedded within rituals that are not specifically seen as magic rituals. An example is the increase ceremonies of the Australian Aborigines. These are essentially fertility rituals that function to facilitate the successful reproduction of the totem animal (see Chapter 3). They are performed annually and are seen as essential parts of the animals' life cycle. The men who perform the ritual draw sacred designs on their bodies and place various objects on their persons. In this way the men become the totem animal in a magical sense. Their behavior, which is often expressed in dance, brings about a sympathetic behavior in the actual animal. For example, the acting out of the copulation and birth of an animal species will translate into reproductive success for those animals.

The principle of sympathy explains many folk customs, including those in American society. Folklorist Wayland D. Hand has collected many examples, such as walnuts being good for the brain.⁶ After all, does not the shell resemble a skull and the meat inside resemble the brain?

Many of the practices that are labeled "alternative medicine" or "homeopathic medicine" in American society are based on the Law of Similarity. Traditional herbal medicine is often based on the **doctrine of signatures**. This is the belief that signs telling of a plant's medical use are somehow embedded within the structure and nature of the plant itself. Some believe that God provided these signatures so that people could ascertain the use of particular plants in healing. For example, red cloverhead is used to treat problems of the blood, as is the red sap of the bloodroot. Indigestion is treated by several yellow plants associated with the yellow color of the bile that is often vomited up. The fused leaves of the boneset plant are used, as the plant's name suggest, to heal broken bones.

Similar analogies appear to be the basis of many food prohibitions observed by pregnant women among the Beng of the Ivory Coast, West Africa. A pregnant woman is told not to eat meat from the bushbuck antelope, which has a striped coat. If she does, her child will be born with striped skin. During pregnancy a woman should give herself enemas using a particular vine that has slippery leaves; then the infant will move quickly through the birth canal during birth. The soon-to-be new mother is also told that her behavior during her pregnancy will be reflected in her child, especially negative behaviors. A pregnant woman who steals will have a child

with the long arm of a thief. Some Americans think that if the mother is anxious or nervous during pregnancy, the baby will be nervous and fussy.

Contagious Magic

Contagious magic is based on the premise that things that were once in contact always maintain a connection. An example of contagious magic from our own culture is the rabbit's foot. The rabbit is a successful animal, but not because it is intelligent. It is a prey animal for a wide variety of other animals, but some rabbits survive. This must mean that the predators are not always successful. Because rabbits are not smart, they must be lucky. If we carry a part of this lucky animal, the luck will rub off on us.

The following example comes from New Guinea. If a man has been hit in battle by an arrow, his friends will bind up the wound and put a cool poultice on it to keep the fever down and make him comfortable. They will also put a poultice on the arrow, which they have taken out of the wound, because it was connected with the wound, and this too will help with the cure. The enemy who fired the

BOX 6.2 • *Magic and the Determination of Longitude*

The use of magic was proposed to solve one of the major navigational problems of the eighteenth century: the need to establish longitude so that ships would be able to locate themselves on a map and thereby not only find their destination, but also accomplish this without running into rocks or land. The British Parliament passed the Longitude Act of 1714, naming a prize of millions of pounds for a practical and useful method of determining longitude. Needless to say, a great number of "interesting" ideas were submitted. In her book *Longitude*, Dava Sobel writes about some of the proposals that were submitted.

It became apparent that if one knew the time where one was and compared it with the time in London, one could calculate longitude. Local time can be determined by the point at which the sun is directly overhead. Keeping track of London time was a bit more

daunting. This led to the invention of the chronometer, an extremely accurate clock, so that the navigator knew at all times what time it was in England.

However, it is another idea, presented in 1687, that interests us here. A powder, said to have been discovered in France, was reputed to heal something at some distance. So, for example, if the bandages removed from a wound were treated with the powder, the wound would heal more rapidly. However, the powder was painful to the body of a person to whom it had been applied. The idea of using this as a timekeeping device was very simple: Take a wounded dog aboard a ship but keep some of the dog's bandages from the wound in London. Every day, at noon, have someone dip the bandages into the healing powder. This would make the dog yelp on board the ship, thereby informing the captain that it was noon in London.

Source: D. Sobel, *Longitude* (New York: Walker, 1995).

arrow, however, is likely to be practicing counter-magic. Back in his camp he will keep the bow near the fire and twang the string from time to time because the bow fired the arrow that made the wound, and through this connection he can send twinges of pain.

Wayland Hand notes that there are many examples of American folk medicine that are based on the principle of contagion. Many of these involve transference of the disease into some object. The object could then be disposed of, thus curing the illness. Warts could be cured by rubbing a penny on the wart and then burying the coin. One cure for whooping cough was to tie a caterpillar in a band around the neck of the child. The illness disappeared as the caterpillar died, the disease having been successfully transferred to the animal.

We also see the principle of contagion in modern American society with the collection of, and prices paid for, anything used by a celebrity. A sweaty shirt thrown by one of your professors into the classroom would get a very different reaction than a shirt that had been worn by, and thrown by, your favorite rock star or actor.

Anything connected with the person can be used in contagious magic. If you can get hair, a nail cutting, or even a belonging (such as clothes), you can do your worst to the person it came from. In fact, a hair from your enemy's head is likely to be the first thing any sorcerer would ask you for before taking on a contract to liquidate the enemy. You can attack someone through his or her footprint, name, shadow, or reflection (although the latter also involves soul beliefs).

Why Magic Works

Not all magic is directed or purposeful. It is possible to set something in motion without being aware of it, without deliberately performing a ritual. For example, if you break a mirror, you set in motion events that will result in bad luck. This is why many people are careful not to step on a crack in the sidewalk and not to let a black cat cross their paths. You have not offended a deity who is extracting punishment. You have unwittingly pressed the wrong button and the result—bad luck—will automatically happen.

This perceived relationship between doing something and what appears to be a result of that action is the basis of much behavior in all societies, including our own. I find a coin on the sidewalk that I place in my pocket. The next day something good happens—I unexpectedly receive a raise. In the world of logic and science the juxtaposition of two events does not necessarily imply causality. It does not suggest that the presence of the coin in my pocket is responsible for my good fortune. It is most likely simply coincidence and nothing more.

However, the human mind frequently sees coincidence as evidence of causation. A student wears a particular shirt to a final exam and earns a grade of A in spite of not having had enough time to study. Although doing well can be attributed to hard work, there is always an element of uncertainty. A student might study hard for an exam yet find a question on material that, for some reason, was not studied very extensively—bad luck. Or the question might just happen to be exactly on the material that was well prepared—good luck. When good luck happens, it is often attributed to some outside entity, such as a piece of clothing or ob-

ject that was being worn or carried that day, or perhaps to the fact that the student behaved in a particular way before the exam—drinking a particular beverage in a particular location, for example.

Tylor addressed the question of why people believe that magic works. The answer is because magic appears never to fail. There are several reasons for this. First, magic often attempts to bring about events that will occur naturally. Rain magic works because it will eventually rain. Rain magic often is performed at the end of the dry season, when rain is badly needed. Of course, the onset of rains normally follows the end of the dry season. However, the practitioners of such magic do not see it that way. The rain comes not naturally, but as a result of the ritual. The proof is very simple: You perform the ritual, and it rains. We could perform an experiment and try to convince a community not to perform rain magic to see what would happen, but to people who depend on their crops for survival this would be a very foolish thing to do. In addition, humans are very resistant to changing their beliefs, even when presented with evidence to the contrary.

This observation is important in understanding the use of magic and other healing rituals in curing illness. In our society over 90 percent of all illnesses, including colds and fevers, will eventually disappear, with or without treatment. Therefore in the vast majority of illnesses a cure will naturally follow the ritual. Again we have to assess the juxtaposition of the ritual and the end of the illness—a case of cause and effect.

People do not generally ask impossible things of magic. Magic to bring rain at the end of the dry season or to make a garden grow is likely to work. Magic to enable a student to pass an exam without studying or to be able to fly off the roof of a building is likely to fail. No one tries to grow his or her garden by magic alone. There is a natural world that demands a natural response (you must plant correctly and weed and water your garden), and there is a supernatural world that demands a supernatural response (you must make sure no supernatural harm comes to your garden and try to gain supernatural help for its success).

Of course, if you do not get the expected results, it could be because you did not do it right; the failure is with the magician, not the magic. In fact, if the belief is that the ritual must be performed without error for it to succeed, failure of the ritual is direct evidence that the magician made an error. Also, someone else could be doing counter-magic; one person's failure is another person's success. Or magic might be performed by two opposing entities, and the more powerful will prevail over the weaker. For example, one village might be using magic to kill members of another village, while people in the latter village might be performing magic to prevent illness and death. Thus warfare is being conducted on a supernatural plane.

Finally, there is the issue of selective memory. We do not remember everything that happens to us. Some things are etched in our memories; other things are quickly forgotten. Successes, even if infrequent, are remembered and are thought of as proof that something works. Memories of failures, even if common, quickly fade with time.

However, there are documented cases of magic working, especially death magic (i.e., magic is worked against someone who then dies). Is there a physiological basis for such deaths? This issue is discussed by Harry D. Eastwell among

the Australian Aborigines of Arnhem Land.⁷ Eastwell notes that the basis of such death by magic often is the result of an extreme state of fear. Such fear gives rise to many symptoms, such as agitation, sleeplessness, and sweating. This is further exacerbated by the belief on the part of the victim and his or her family that death is inevitable. Thus as symptoms increase in intensity, the family withdraw support because the patient is seen as socially dead. Because the individual is socially dead, the family will not provide food and water and will often begin funeral rituals before death has occurred.

Magic among the Azande

One of the most detailed studies of a religious system of a small-scale society is that of the Azande conducted by E. E. Evans-Pritchard in the 1920s and 1930s.⁸ The Azande live in the southern Sudan, Congo culture area, which at the time Evans-Pritchard worked was a British colony. Here we will examine Zande magic; later in this chapter we will look at Zande divination. We will return to the Azande in the Chapter 9 when we discuss witchcraft.

Among the Azande magic involves the use of objects, usually of plant material, called *medicines*. A medicine is an object in which supernatural power resides. To access this power, to change a piece of wood or plant material into medicine, requires ritual. The object, which may be consumed in the ritual or kept intact for long periods of time, then becomes the center of magical rituals.

There are large numbers of plants from which medicines are derived. Sometimes the association between the nature of the plant and its use is clearly based on the Law of Similarity. This is recognized by the Azande, who point out that a particular plant is used because of its resemblance to something that is associated with the purpose of the magic. A good example is a particular fruit that is full of a milky sap. The fruit resembles the breast of a woman with a young child. A drink is made from the root of the plant and is given to a mother who is having difficulty producing enough milk for her infant.

The thousands of available medicines can be placed in a series of categories based on their purpose. There are those that control nature, such as rain. One is used to delay sunset so that the person will have time to reach home before dark. Many medicines are associated with horticulture and hunting. For example, medicines are used to direct the flight of a spear or an arrow into the prey and to protect the hunter from dangerous animals. Craftsmen, such as blacksmiths, have their own magic to aid in their task. Some medicines are used against witches and sorcerers. Magic is used to bring about success in love and to guarantee a safe journey. An important function of magic is to avenge murder, theft, and adultery. Finally, diseases are cured by using specific medicines.

There are several ways in which the medicine is used. For example, plant material may be burned and, using oil, made into a paste that is then rubbed into incisions made on the face or torso; or the medicine may be made into an infusion that is drunk. A man may make a whistle out of a particular variety of wood and keep this whistle tied around his waist. He blows it in the morning soon after wak-

ing up as a protection against misfortune. This very simple type of ritual is very common. But even more important rituals tend to be performed privately so that an enemy will not know that it is being performed and use other magic to interfere with the effects of the ritual. In some cases a man might not want others to know that he owns a particular medicine. He does not want to be pestered by kin to perform the magic for them.

Zande magic rites are not very formal, nor are they usually public. There are a number of ritual actions that need to be performed; yet the order of their performance will vary. Although there are some public rituals, such as war magic performed by a chief, most magic is performed by a single individual for his or her immediate need.

The ritual itself is usually quite simple. It involves manipulating the medicine and reciting a spell. The spell is not formal. The individual simply addresses the medicine and tells it what he or she wants done. Unlike magical spells in other societies, power does not reside in the spell. Rather the power resides in the medicine, and the spell is simply a way of waking up the power and giving the power instructions. The manner is quite informal; the only requirement is that the instructions be clear. If the medicine is handled correctly and the instructions are clear, the magic will work. Another requirement is the observation of a number of tabus, although which tabus are observed vary widely. Commonly, they include abstention from sexual activity and the avoidance of certain foods. If the tabu is not observed, the magic will fail.

Sorcery is magic that is worked for illegal or antisocial ends. Whether or not a particular medicine is good or bad often depends on context. For example, magic that is worked to kill someone out of spite is bad. It is worked in secret in the dead of night. If a person who works bad magic is discovered, he or she will be killed. On the other hand, lethal magic that is legally sanctioned is good magic. This includes magic used to kill witches and sorcerers. Anything that disrupts the life and happiness of someone is sorcery. Sorcery also can be dealt with by counter-magic and antidotes.

Sorcery among the Fore

Although magic is used for a variety of reasons to increase the probability of success and control the uncertainties of life, magic can also be used in antisocial ways to interfere with the economic activities of others and to bring about illness and even death. The use of magic in this way is referred to as sorcery.

The Fore of New Guinea believe that the disease kuru is caused by sorcery (see Chapter 1). The sorcerer steals food remnants, hair, nail clippings, or excrement from the victim. He makes a bundle with leaves and some sorcerer's stones and places the bundle in cold, muddy ground. He then beats the bundle with a stick and calls the victim's name, reciting the following spell: "I break the bones of your arms, I break the bones of your hands, I break the bones of your legs, and finally I make you die."⁹ The location of the bundle in cold, muddy ground suggests the deep chill felt by immobilized kuru patients. The use of something from the victim,

such as hair, is an example of contagious magic. The Fore attempt to prevent kuru by attempting to deprive the sorcerer of the materials he needs. Much day-to-day behavior involves the hiding of hair clippings, parings, feces, and food scraps.

The Fore recognize many diseases, some of which correspond to diseases recognized by Western medicine. They are usually seen as the result of sorcery. Many magical techniques use materials that were once in contact with the victim, as in kuru, but many use special poisons that are placed where the victim will make contact with it, such as on a trail. In *nankili*, or pleurisy (a lung condition), the sorcerer makes bone needles out of the bones of pigs, cassowary, or possums. He blows smoke on the bone needles to make the needles fly into the victim's body.

Wiccan Magic

Wicca is a **Neo-Pagan** religion, meaning that it is a revival of pre-Christian religious practices. Although there is great variation within the Wiccan religion, magic is often a central element of ritual. Practitioners see their magical knowledge and rituals as a continuation of thousands of years of folk magic, which was often lost or pushed underground by the spread of Christianity. Wiccans also borrow freely from the magic traditions of various cultures around the world.

The magic ritual usually consists of a stated goal, the manipulation of specific objects, and the observation of special conditions, such as place and time. However, the core of the ritual, what is often considered the "real magic," is movement of energy, which takes place within the practitioner. The magician builds up this energy within herself or himself, and it is released at the right time to bring about the goal of the spell.

Wiccan magic is based on the worldview that there is a power that exists in all things. Through rituals (involving such things as music, dance, visualizations and the manipulation of objects) this power can be awakened and concentrated and can be set to affect a particular goal, which is the purpose of the spell. The power can also be moved from one person to another or between humans, places, and objects. As this power moves to its intended target, it will have an effect on that target.

Popular objects used in Wiccan spells include crystals, herbs, oils, candles, images, runes, and specific foods. The symbolism of color is also used, as are chanting and creative visualization. The religion is closely connected to nature, and the working of magic spells might require a consideration of the weather, season, lunar phase and/or time of day. The goal of such magic is often very practical and meant to help with everyday challenges such as relationships, health, protection, money, and employment. Magic is to be used when all else fails and in conjunction with more mundane efforts. For example, the belief is that just doing magic to get a job will not help unless you also take practical measures, such as sending out resumes. Because each individual's personal power is limited, it should not be used lightly.

As we will see in Chapter 9, Wiccan moral rules are such that magic is to be used only for positive purposes. Wiccans often say that they respect life, respect the earth, and respect the power too much to do magic for evil.

Divination

In the previous section we examined the subject of magic, techniques for directly and automatically bringing about desired results through supernatural mechanisms. People use magic for a variety of purposes, such as bringing rain, curing illness, and ensuring fertility. Another way of dealing with the uncertainties of life is to anticipate them. As the saying goes, “Knowledge is power.” If we only knew what the future holds for us or what is happening at the present time in places and situations that are hidden from us, decision making would certainly be easier. We could see the consequences of our actions and learn about unknown variables that affect our lives.

Techniques for obtaining information about things unknown, including events that will occur in the future, is known as **divination**. The word *divination* comes from the same root as the word *divinity*. This implies that divination has to do with the supernatural.

The nature of many forms of divination is magical. Such magical rituals are used to manipulate the supernatural world in order to provide information. In other words, the ends of a magical ritual can be a physical occurrence, such as the coming of rain, or information, such as who will win the Super Bowl.

Of course, supernatural beings—ancestors, spirits, and gods—also may have access to unknown information. Many divination techniques involve contact with such supernatural entities, as when a medium contacts the spirit of a deceased individual or when a shaman falls into a trance.

Other forms of divination are based on the idea that the world consists of things and events that are interconnected with one another. We saw this same worldview for the workings of magic. In magic it is based on the manipulation of perceived connections between things; in divination it is based on observing these connections. For example, many people believe that the movements of the planets, sun, and moon are in some way ultimately connected with a person’s life and that an understanding of these movements enables one to learn about the future. There is much information in nature, and those who are knowledgeable and observant often make accurate predictions. For example, a change in wind direction during a particular time of the day can foretell the coming of rain. This is a very rational approach, one that leads to planning. But the relationship between some signs is not obvious and, in fact, might not be based on a scientific point of view. The interpretation of such signs falls into the area of divination.

Forms of Divination

There are many ways of accomplishing an act of divination. To understand these methods better, we can classify various techniques into a number of categories.

A basic characteristic of divination techniques is that some are **inspirational** and others are **noninspirational**. Inspirational forms of divination involve some type of spiritual experience such as a direct contact with a supernatural being through an altered state of consciousness, usually possession. This form of

divination is sometimes referred to as **natural** or **emotive divination**. Noninspirational or **artificial** forms are more magical ways of doing divination and include the reading of natural events as well as the manipulation of oracular devices. (The term *oracle* usually refers to a specific device that is used for divination and can refer to inspirational or noninspirational forms. Examples are the poison oracle of the Azande, to be described shortly, and a contemporary American toy called the Magic 8 Ball.)

We also can divide divination techniques into **fortuitous** and **deliberate** types. Fortuitous forms happen without any conscious effort on the part of the individual. One sees a flight of birds overhead or unexpectedly falls into a trance and has a vision. Deliberate forms are those that someone sets out to do, such as reading tarot cards or examining the liver of a sacrificed animal.

Using these two ways of classifying divination techniques, we can create four categories: fortuitous noninspirational, deliberate noninspirational, fortuitous inspirational, and deliberate inspirational, as shown in Table 6.1.

TABLE 6.1 *A Classification of Methods of Divination*

	<i>Noninspirational</i>	<i>Inspirational</i>
Fortuitous	Apantomancy	Necromancy
	Omens	Oneiromancy
	Ornithomancy	Possession
		Presentiments
		Prophecy
Deliberate	Aleuromancy	Medium
	Astrology	
	Dowsing	
	Flipping a coin	
	Graphology	
	Haruspication	
	Magic eight ball	
	Ordeals	
	Ouija board	
	Palmistry	
	Phrenology	
	Scapulamancy	
	Tarot cards	
	Tasseography	

Divination Techniques

There is a wide variety of divination methods. We will review a number of these, but, of course, this cannot be an exhaustive list.

We will begin with dreams, which are a common form of divination. Dreams are often thought of as visits from spirits or visions of journeys taken by one's soul during sleep. Either way, an individual establishes a connection with the supernatural world. All you have to do is to be able to interpret what you experience in the dream. Much of the dream experience is symbolic, which often makes dreams difficult to interpret. Sometimes the interpretation is something you can do on your own, but at other times it requires a specialist. The interpretation of dreams is termed **oneiromancy**.

In American society you can purchase a book to help you interpret your dreams. One such book lists the following examples of the meanings associated with the presence of animals in dreams.¹⁰ Dreams of bats flying during the day are a sign of reassurance and calm, but bats flying during the night signify a problem. A bull is a sign of tough competition. Riding a horse is a sign of happiness, but a black horse signifies grief. Dreaming about monkeys is a warning that you are surrounded by lies and deceit. And so it goes for thousands of dreams experiences that are interpreted as signs telling of what is to be.

These interpretations of dream content are based on Euro-American dream symbolism. However, dreams may be interpreted differently in non-Euro-American cultures. Some scholars see two basic categories of dreams. One is the individual dream, which is the type familiar to us, the kind that comes from inside of the dreamer. In some societies, however, the source of the dream may lie outside of the dreamer. These are the culturally patterned dreams that often are deliberately sought—in a coming-of-age ritual, for example. Sometimes the individual simply waits for the appropriate, culturally demanded dream to occur, often encouraged by a shaman or parent. Other dreams may be induced by fasting, isolation, and so forth.

Whatever the source of the dream, they often are a source of information, which classifies them as a divination method. Often an ancestor will appear in a dream and prescribe for the dreamer a cure for illness or a warning of what is to come. Guardian spirits and totems may let themselves be known through dreams. Or a spirit may appear in a dream informing the individual what his lot in life is, such as a call to a career as a shaman or priest. Or a dream may be a visit from the soul of a recently deceased relative informing the dreamer of a particular desire of the soul. Failure to meet this desire might result in illness and perhaps death.

Presentiments are feelings that a person experiences. They suggest that something is about to happen, such as a feeling of dread or an impending disaster. In some societies a warrior on a raid will return to the camp or village on feeling a presentiment that is thought to be an omen of his impending death on the raid. The warrior will be thought of not as a coward, but as a prudent individual.

Body actions include such things as sneezing, twitching, and hiccupping. Such activities can be interpreted in many ways, and interpretations of the same

action differ from culture to culture. Some American examples are as follows: If you sneeze before breakfast, you will receive a letter that day. If you sneeze six times, you will go on a journey. If you hiccup or your ears are burning, someone is talking about you.

The term **necromancy** is used in various ways. Generally, it refers to divination through contact with the dead or ancestors. In ancient Greek society, when a person died under suspicious circumstances, the body was brought into the temple for close examination. It was believed that signs on the body were attempts of the spirit of the dead to communicate what happened and who did it. In most cases a diviner enters a trance in an attempt to communicate with the dead.

Knowledge can be derived from the observation of living or dead animals. This includes **omens**, fortuitous happenings or conditions that provide information. There are a large number of examples as well as a very extensive vocabulary that describes them. Here are only a few.

One can gain information from the observed behavior of animals. **Ornithomancy** involves reading the path and form of a flight of birds, and **apantomancy** refers to a chance meeting with an animal, such as a black cat crossing one's path. (Many cultures attribute good and bad fortune to various animals that one comes upon. Among the Nandi of East Africa, if a rat crosses one's path, that is good, but if it is a snake, that is bad.)

An animal does not have to be alive to be used for divination, and it is sometimes a sacrificed animal or part of an animal that is examined for answers to questions. **Haruspication**, the examination of the entrails of sacrificed animals, was part of the ceremonies opening a session of the Senate in ancient Rome. In another technique a dried scapula or shoulder blade from an animal skeleton, such as a sheep, or even from a human skeleton is dried. Sometimes the question is written on the bone. The scapula is then placed in a fire, and the pattern of burns and cracks is read by a specialist to determine the response. This is called **scapulamancy**.

Many physical entities of the natural world are "read" for information. **Astrology** is based on the belief that all of the stars and planets, as well as the sun and moon influence the destiny of people. Modern astrology is based on an ancient interpretation of the mechanics of the organization of an earth-centered solar system. Other techniques observe the winds and the movement of water. Infrequent appearances of natural events, such as earthquakes and comets, are said to portend evil events.

There are many other forms of divination that are familiar to most Americans. These include **aleuromancy**, the use of flour (as in fortune cookies); **dowsing**, in which a forked stick is used to locate water underground; **graphology**, handwriting analysis; **palmistry**, the reading of the lines of the palm of the hand; **phrenology**, the study of the shape and structure of the head; and **tasseography**, the reading of tea leaves. Other familiar forms of divinations are mechanical types that include the manipulation of objects (see Box 6.3). A good example is flipping a coin. This is the most common type in American society and includes the Ouija board, Magic 8 Ball, and tarot cards. Other types of mechanical devices are used in other societies. For example, Figure 6.2 is a contemporary Yoruba divination tray. Cowry shells are thrown on the tray and the diviner reads the pattern that is formed.

BOX 6.3 • I Ching: The Book of Changes

The *I-Ching*, or *The Book of Changes*, is a Chinese divination text that is thousands of years old. The methods described provide much more than just yes/no answers and are seen not so much as foretelling the future, but rather as revealing what the person needs to do to live in harmony with the forces of the universe that control the future.

In Chapter 3 we discussed the concepts of *yin* and *yang*, the two interacting forces in the universe. *Yin* is the female element and is associated with coldness, darkness, softness, and the earth. *Yang* is the male element and is associated with warmth, light, hardness, and the heavens. The two elements are mutually dependent and need to be in equilibrium.

In the *I Ching*, *yang* is represented by a single line (—), and *yin* is represented by a broken line (— —). A set of three lines produces eight patterns or trigrams. Each is named and is associated with nature: heaven, earth, fire, water, thunder, wind, mountain, and lake. In addition, each is associated with a number of characteristics. For example, K'un, represented by three broken lines, is the earth and is associated with the color black and the animal the cow. K'un is gentle, passive, and nurturing. Two sets of trigrams are then put together to form the sixty-four hexagrams.

There are many techniques of casting a hexagram. Some methods are quite complicated and involve much ritual. One commonly used method involves the throwing of three coins. The outcomes of six throws iden-

tify the six lines in the hexagram. A more elaborate method of casting the hexagram is to use a set of yarrow stalks.

Each hexagram can be read on several levels. First, each of the six lines, which can be *yin* or *yang*, has meaning. Second, one can examine the pair of trigrams. However, most important are the meanings assigned to each of the sixty-four hexagrams.

In some techniques of casting, there are four types of lines: old *yin*, young *yin*, old *yang*, and young *yang*. Old *yin* and old *yang* are changing lines. While the original hexagram is used to provide insight into the present, when the changing lines change to the opposite form, information is provided about the future. Thus if the top two lines are old *yin*, they will change into *yang* creating a second hexagram.

As examples, here are brief descriptions of three hexagrams. The hexagram that is composed of six solid lines (*yang*) is named Heaven. "This hexagram is a good omen for an important occasion of state, an imperial sacrificial rite." The hexagram named Small Castle is composed of five solid lines and one broken line third from the top. "The image of heavy clouds promising rain that has not yet arrived conveys a mood of expectation and anxiety. There is a sense of impending storm." Finally, the hexagram named Peace consists of three broken lines on top and three solid lines at the bottom. "Some small sacrifices may be called for in order to attain your larger goal. Generally favorable."

Source: K. and R. Huang, *I Ching* (New York: Workman, 1987).

Inspirational Forms. Inspirational divination is a form in which an individual has direct contact with a supernatural being, be it an ancestor, a ghost, a spirit, or a god. This is usually accomplished through an altered state of consciousness. **Possession** can be either fortuitous or deliberate. **Prophecy** is fortuitous in that the prophet receives information through a vision unexpectedly, without any necessary overt action on the part of the individual.



FIGURE 6.2 *Divination Tray with Cowry Shells.* This tray was created by contemporary Puerto Rican artist Manual Varga.

A familiar example of prophecy is Moses. The book of Exodus tells that Moses was tending his father-in-law's flock and one day led them to the edge of the desert. An angel of God appeared to Moses from within a burning bush. God told Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, but Moses at first did not want to go. He replied, "Who am I, that I should go to pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" God replied, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3).

Deliberate possession involves an overt action whereby the individual falls into a trance. Such people would be called **mediums**. Communication from the deities through possession, usually of a priest, is a very common feature of many religious systems.

Ordeals. Ordeals are painful and often life-threatening tests that a person who is suspected of guilt may be forced to undergo, such as dipping a hand into hot oil, swallowing poison, or having a red-hot knife blade pressed against some part of the body. Ordeals can be thought of as a trial by divination performed on the body of the accused. In some cultures, including past European and American cultures, ordeals were an important part of criminal trials.

Among the Kpelle of Liberia, trials are conducted through the use of the hot knife ordeal. The ordeal is conducted by a specialist, who is licensed by the government. The specialist will heat a knife in a fire and first pass the knife over his own body to show that the ordeal is valid because he himself is not burned. Then the knife is stroked over the body of the accused. If the individual is burned, he is guilty.

Ordeals can rely on the idea, as in Christian Europe, that an ordeal reflected the judgment of God, who would punish the guilty and save the innocent. In most cases it seems that the fact of guilt or innocence itself acted in some magical way to affect the ordeal. For example, in a trial by fire only the guilty would be burned.

It might appear that in ordeals it is the guilty who suffered, but this is not always the case. In trial by water it is the innocent who runs the risk. The idea is that the pure element of water would reject the impure, being happy to accept and drown an innocent person but would cast up and reject an impure body such as that of a witch or a criminal. This was extensively used against accused witches. The accused was tied up and tossed into the water. She had a rope on her with a mark at a certain length. If she sank to this point, she was innocent. She would be pulled up and turned loose—if she could be resuscitated. A medieval text reads:¹¹

Consecration to Be Said over the Man. May omnipotent God, who did order baptism to be made by water, and did grant remission of sins to men through baptism: may He, through His mercy, decree a right judgment through that water. If, namely, thou art guilty in that matter, may the water which received thee in baptism not receive thee now; if however, thou art innocent, may the water which received thee in baptism receive thee now. Through Christ our Lord.

Fore Divination

We have already discussed the Fore of New Guinea and the effects of the disease kuru in their lives (see Chapter 1). The Fore believe that sorcery is the cause of the disease. Therefore an essential element in curing kuru is the identification of the sorcerer. The most common divination technique uses a possum as a vehicle for supernatural revelation. The victim's husband, brothers, and husband's age mates place some of her hair clippings in one small bamboo tube. In another tube they insert the body of a freshly killed possum. Striking one bamboo against the other, they call the name of the supposed sorcerer and then place the bamboo containing the animal in the fire. The guilt of the accused is established if the possum's liver, the locus of its consciousness, remains uncooked. After divination they do not openly accuse a specific person of sorcery, but the suspected sorcerer is subjected to further tests or death magic.

The Fore also consult healers, who usually belong to distant communities and even non-Fore groups. These “dream men,” whom we would label mediums, enter altered states of consciousness through the rapid inhaling of tobacco and the use of other plant materials that produce trances and hallucinations. Information is also gleaned from dreams. Such diviners are then able to identify sorcerers.

Oracles of the Azande

Zande oracles have been described in great detail by Evans-Pritchard. The best known are *iwa*, the rubbing-board oracle; *dakpa*, the termite oracle; and *benge*, the poison oracle.

The oracle that is most often used is *iwa*, or the rubbing-board oracle. This is a relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use oracle that can be consulted very quickly. There are many situations in which some answer is urgently needed, such as the sudden onset of an illness, decisions about going on a journey, questions about interpersonal relationships, and a myriad of minor questions. Many older men carry *iwa* on their persons, ready to consult it at a moment's notice. If a man has not acquired or learned to use the oracle, it is quite easy to find a friend or relative who has.

The rubbing-board oracle takes many shapes, but it is relatively small and is always made of wood with a flat, round or oval “female” surface and a “male” piece or lid that fits on top. After being carved, the object becomes an oracle only after it has been rubbed with medicines and buried in the ground for a few days to permit the medicines to work. The female surface is treated with plant juices, and the male lid is moistened with water. As the lid is moved back and forth, it will either move smoothly or stick to the female surface. The sticking is usually interpreted as a yes answer; moving smoothly is interpreted as a no answer.

Iwa is manufactured and used by humans and therefore is thought to be prone to error. Although it is sometimes inaccurate, this fact is balanced against the ease of use and the fact that a large number of questions can be asked of this oracle within a very short period of time. It often serves as the first step in the process that leads to the use of more reliable, albeit more expensive and complex, oracles.

A greater level of reliability is given by *dakpa*, the termite oracle. Just about any man, and sometimes a woman, can consult *dakpa*. All one has to do is to find a termite mound and then take two branches from two different trees and place them into the mound. The next day one removes the two to see which one or both has been eaten by the termites. Of course, the process is slow—one has to wait over night—and because only few questions can be asked at any one time, its use is quite limited. However, it is considered to be reliable, primarily because it is not manufactured by humans, the agents of the oracle being termites that are not influenced by the same things that influence a person.

Without question the most important Zande oracle is *benge*. When it is consulted or sanctioned by a chief, the results may be used as evidence in legal proceedings. It is used in all important legal and social situations and directs the Azande on what to do in major crisis situations.

The poison that is used is a red powder that is manufactured from a forest creeper and mixed with water to become a paste. The liquid is squeezed out of the

paste into the beaks of small chickens, which are compelled to swallow it. Generally violent spasms follow. The doses sometimes prove fatal, but just as often the chickens recover, and sometimes they are even completely unaffected by the poison. From the behavior of the chickens, especially by their death or survival, Azande receive answers to the questions they place before the oracle.

The creeper does not grow in Zandeland. It takes a long, difficult journey through the territory of other tribes to procure the poison. This, in part, accounts for the high value the Zande place on the poison oracle. The oracular consultation takes place away from the homesteads where the oracle can be consulted in secrecy without interference from witches. The equipment includes the poison and a basket of chickens. The Azande raise chickens but do not regularly slaughter them for food except on very special occasions. Eggs are not consumed but are permitted to hatch. Chickens of all ages can be used.

The oracle is owned by older men. This ownership conveys authority and prestige, but older men will consult the oracle for younger kinsmen as an obligation of kinship. Women are excluded from any contact with *benge*.

It takes experience and skill to become a good operator of the oracle, to judge the amount of poison to be given the chickens, and to observe and interpret the behavior of the chickens. At the start of a consultation the operator, who has observed a number of tabus, prepares the poison. A second man will pose the questions. The operator twirls a grass brush in the liquid poison and squeezes the brush so that the poison runs into the throat of the chicken. Then the questioner begins to address the poison for several minutes, and more poison is given to the chicken. Then the operator takes the chicken in his hand, jerks it back and forth, and finally places it on the ground. The operator and questioner watch as the animal dies or survives. Depending on the way in which the question was phrased and the instructions that are given to the poison, the death or survival of the chicken provides a yes/no answer to the question. We will discuss *benge* further when we discuss Zande witchcraft in Chapter 9, since the poison oracle is the principle method of determining the identity of a witch.

Bunyoro Divination

The Bunyoro of Uganda (East African Cattle culture area) consult a diviner when they are in trouble and want to know what caused the trouble and what to do about it. Problems include suspected sorcery or witchcraft, barrenness, impotence, and frequent miscarriages. Usual causes are sorcery by a living person, activity of a ghost, or agency of one of the numerous nonhuman *mbandua* spirits. Two common types of divination among the Bunyoro are various mechanical forms (which involve the manipulation of material objects) and spirit mediumship.

The most common mechanical method involves the use of cowrie shells. The tops of the shells are cut off so that they will lie flat in an up or down position. The diviner whispers a question and instructions to the shells and then drops them on the ground. The answer is determined by the pattern made by the thrown shells. Some standard interpretations include the following: If the shells fall with the cut-off side up, the prognosis is good; if one shell falls onto another shell, someone

will die; if the shells are scattered, someone is going on a journey; three or more shells in a line indicate a safe return.

The Bunyoro also have a traditional cult of spirit mediumship. Powerful spirits may be present, and modesty and respect are appropriate. The diviner is dressed in a distinctive and striking costume with a special headdress. Once the spirit has possessed the body of the medium, it is possible for individuals to speak directly to the spirit, asking specific questions and receiving specific answers.

Astrology

Quite likely the most popular divination technique practiced in the United States today, astrology has a history stretching back thousands of years. The basis of astrology is the assumption of a causal relationship between celestial phenomena and terrestrial ones, or the influence that the stars and planets have on the lives of human beings. Astrology can be used to examine the life of a specific individual or to divine events of importance to the whole community. The origins of astrology appear to have been in Babylonia and spread from there to Greece, Rome, and Egypt; from there to Iran and India; and then on to Central Asia, Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan.

Astrology in Babylonia was the most common form of divination. However it was not done on an individual basis, but rather for the well-being of the entire community. The casting of horoscopes did not occur until the fifth century B.C.E., rather late in the history of Babylonian astrology. Other important innovations included dividing the ecliptic of the sun's orbit around the earth into twelve zones of thirty degrees each.

Crucial to Babylonian astrology was the idea that the movements of the celestial bodies represented the will of the gods. Therefore by reading the signs in the heavens, the future could be divined. The sky was seen as containing the "mansions" of the three principal gods: Anu, Enlil, and Ea. These gods governed the "celestial paths" or three belts that ran along the equator, the Tropic of Cancer, and the Tropic of Capricorn. Each of the planets was also identified with a specific deity. For example, the planet Jupiter was associated with Marduk, and Venus was associated with the goddess Ishtar. Ultimately, a god was linked to, and was seen to rule over, each month. Importantly, this was closely linked with the activities of the agricultural cycle.

From Babylonia astrology spread to Greece, Rome, and Egypt, where it was developed far beyond what the Babylonians had achieved. Hipparchus is credited with discovering the position of the equinoxes around 130 B.C.E., thus laying the foundation for the horoscope as we now know it. One of the most significant contributions to astrology on the part of the Greeks is this attempt to chart an individual's destiny by looking at things such as the position of the stars. From the Greeks we also get the fully developed zodiac. Each of the twelve zones was linked to a particular animal (e.g., Saturn with a goat, Mars with a ram, Venus with a bull). From Greece astrology spread to India and Iran and throughout much of Asia.

In Europe, Greek astrological knowledge was revived only with the translation of Arabic texts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There was a large renewal of interest in the subject in Western Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Up until the rise of modern science in the sixteenth century, astrology and astronomy were intertwined. With the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, astrology lost any scientific basis and became separate from astronomy.

Astrology is extremely popular in the United States today. Even people who do not believe in its divinatory abilities generally still know what their sign is and at least a little of what is associated with that sign. For example, both of us are Geminis, one born in late May and the other in early June, albeit a generation apart. Gemini is ruled by Mercury and symbolized by the twins. The twin symbolism is supposed to relate to the dual, creative, versatile, and complex nature of those born under this sign. Less flattering descriptions include unpredictable, restless, and confusing to others. Gemini is also considered to be a masculine, outer-directed, and active sign. One of three air signs, Gemini is associated with being free-thinking, intellectual, and communicative. Of course, an individual horoscope could be done for each of us that would also take into account the specific day and time of our respective births.

Conclusion

Although magic at first appears to be an exotic topic, practiced by those in foreign places, in reality magical thinking is a very human way of thinking and is practiced at some time or another by every one of us. The logic of magic not only is the result of our normal mental processes, but also answers our need to have some control over our lives. Magic gives us control and divination gives us knowledge—two of the major functions of religion.

Magic deals with supernatural forces and thus is a religious phenomenon. In the next two chapters we will turn to what may be more familiar domains of religion and anthropomorphic supernatural beings.

Summary

Magic refers to activities by which a person can compel the supernatural to behave in certain ways. Key components of magical acts are the words that are spoken or the spell and objects that are manipulated in set ways. Magical rituals usually can be performed only at special places and at special times. The performer must often observe certain restrictions such as abstention from sexual intercourse and avoidance of certain foods. A magician is usually a worker in the kind of magic that is on the whole public and good, whereas a sorcerer deals in matters that are evil and antisocial.

Frazer articulated the Law of Sympathy, which states that magic depends on the apparent association or agreement between things. There are two parts to the Law of Sympathy. The first is the Law of Similarity, which states that things that

are alike are the same. The second is the Law of Contagion, which states that things that were once in contact continue to be connected after the connection is severed. The Law of Similarity gives rise to homeopathic or imitative magic, and the Law of Contagion to contagious magic.

Taylor addressed the question of why people believe that magic works. The answer is because magic appears to never fail. There are several reasons for this. Because magic always works, failure must be due to the inadequacies of the magician. Magic usually attempts to bring about events that will naturally occur; people do not generally ask impossible things of magic. Finally, there is the issue of selective memory.

Techniques for obtaining information about things unknown, including events that will occur in the future, is known as divination. Inspirational forms of divination involve some type of spiritual experience, such as a direct contact with a supernatural being through an altered state of consciousness. Noninspirational forms are more magical ways of doing divination and include the reading of natural events as well as the manipulation of oracular devices. Fortuitous forms simply happen without any conscious effort on the part of the individual; deliberate forms are those that someone sets out to do. Examples of divination include omens, presentiments, possession, prophecy, ornithomancy, oneiromancy, necromancy, astrology, dowsing, flipping a coin, ordeals, palmistry, phrenology, and reading tarot cards.

Suggested Readings

Tahir Shah, *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (New York: Time Warner, 2002).

[Shah's travels across southern India to find and learn the art of magic from one of India's greatest practitioners.]

Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes, *In Sorcery's Shadow* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).

[The story of Stoller's work with sorcerers in the Republic of Niger.]

Stuart Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[Examines the psychological and cognitive reasons behind magical thinking.]

Fiction:

Ursula K. LeGuin, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (Emeryville, CA: Parnassus Press, 1968).

[The life story of a powerful wizard growing up in the fantasy world of Earthsea.]

Gregory Maguire, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1995).

[The story of the Wizard of Oz told from the point of view of the Wicked Witch of the West.]

Suggested Web Sites

www.bartleby.com/196

An on-line copy of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

www.era.anthropology.ac.uk/Era-Resources/Era/Divination/Spider/index.html
Spider divination of the Mambila people of West Africa, including simulation.

<http://skeptic.com/divination.html>

Discussion of divination methods from *The Skeptic's Dictionary*.

www.lib.umich.edu/pap/magic/

Traditions of Magic in Late Antiquity exhibit from the University of Michigan.

Study Questions

1. In gambling, we know that the result of a throw of a pair of dice is a random event, yet gamblers believe that various behaviors can influence the results. This is an example of magical thinking. What does this mean?
2. Someone gives you a “lucky charm” that you place in your pocket, and soon afterward sometimes very good happens that you attribute to the charm. Is this an example of magic? Explain.
3. Can you think of any examples of magical thinking in your own life?
4. “Magic always works.” Is this statement true? Explain.
5. There are two major types of magic: homeopathic magic and contagious magic. How are they similar and how are they different? Provide some examples of each type as used in the area of healing.
6. What are some of the divination devices that one can buy in an American toy store? Classify each and explain how it works.
7. One could argue that the use of divination—astrology, for example—is harmless entertainment. Are there negative consequences of living one’s life relying on astrology and fortune telling?

Endnotes

1. E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Collier Books, 1961). p. 60.
2. B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), p. 38.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
4. A. B. Weiner, *The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1988), p. 8.
5. G. Gmelch, “Baseball Magic,” *Transaction*, 8 (1971), pp. 39–41, 54. Courtesy of G. Gmelch.
6. W. D. Hand, “Folk Medical Magic and Symbolism in the West,” in A. Fife, et al. (eds.), *Forms upon the Frontier*, Utah State University Monograph Series 16, no. 2 (1969), pp. 103–118.
7. H. D. Eastwell, “Voodoo Death and the Mechanism for Dispatch of the Dying in East Arnhem, Australia,” *American Anthropologist*, 84 (1982), pp. 5–17.
8. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1937).
9. S. Lindenbaum, *Kuru Sorcery: Disease and Danger in the New Guinea Highlands* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1979), p. 65.
10. R. Grant, *The Illustrated Dream Dictionary* (New York: Sterling, 1991, 1995).
11. From E. F. Henderson, *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages* (London: George Bell, 1910), pp. 314–317.