

« Magic and religion »

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Most cultures of the world have religious beliefs that supernatural powers can be compelled, or at least influenced, to act in certain ways for good or evil purposes by using ritual formulas. These formulas are, in a sense, **magic**. By performing certain magical acts in a particular way, crops might be improved, game herds replenished; illness cured or avoided animals and people made fertile. This is very different from television and stage "magic" that depends on slight-of-hand tricks and contrived illusions rather than supernatural power.

For those who believe that magic is an effective method for causing supernatural actions, there are two major ways in which this commonly believed to occur--sympathy and contagion. **Sympathetic magic** is based on the principle that "like produces like." For instance, whatever happens to an image of someone, will also happen to them. This is the basis for use of Voodoo dolls in the folk tradition of Haiti. If someone sticks a pin into the stomach of the doll, the person of whom it is a likeness will be expected to experience a simultaneous pain in his or her stomach. Sympathetic magic is also referred to as imitative magic. **Contagious magic** is based on the principle that things or persons once in contact can afterward influence each other. In other words, it is believed that there is a

permanent relationship between an individual and any part of his or her body. As a consequence, believers must take special precautions with their hair, fingernails, teeth, clothes, and feces. If anyone obtained these objects, magic could be performed on them which would cause the person they came from to be affected. For instance, someone could use your fingernail clippings in a magical ritual that would cause you to love them or to fall ill and die.

In a belief system that uses magic as the most logical explanation for illness, accidents, and other unexpected occurrences, there is no room for natural causes or chance. Witchcraft provides the explanation--it can be the cause for most effects. Since it can be practiced in secret, the existence of witchcraft cannot be easily refuted with arguments. Believers are not dissuaded by pointing out that there is no evidence that any witchcraft was used against them. For example, you may wake up in the middle of the night and go to get a drink of water. On the way, you trip over a chair in the dark, which causes you to break your leg. You may be convinced that it was an accident. However, if you believe in witchcraft, you will ask why this accident happened to you and why now. Magic practiced in secret by someone who wants to harm you is the answer. The only reasonable questions are who performed the magic and why. The answers to these questions come through **divination** which is a magical procedure by which the cause of a particular event or the future is determined. Once the guilty person is discovered, retribution may be gained by public exposure and punishment or by counter witchcraft.

Divination is accomplished by many different methods around the world. Shamans usually go into a trance to find out

the answers from their spirit helpers. The ancient Romans divined the outcome of battles or business deals by autopsying chickens and examining the condition of their livers. Divination is still popular with many people in the United States today. There are individuals who set up business to divine the future for their clients by examining such things as tea leaves in the bottom of a cup, lines in the hand, and tarot cards.

In societies in which magic and witchcraft are accepted as realities, mental illness is usually explained as being a consequence of witchcraft or the actions of supernatural beings and forces. In Nigeria, folk curers are licensed by the government to use supernatural means and herbal remedies to cure people who are suffering from mental illness. Nigeria also licenses doctors trained in Western medicine, which totally rejects the idea of illness being caused by magic or other supernatural causes. However, the Western trained doctors and the folk curers in Nigeria often work cooperatively and send each other patients that they cannot cure with their own approaches.

When witchcraft is a widespread belief in a society, it may be used as a means of social control. Anti-social or otherwise deviant behavior often results in an individual being labeled as a witch in such societies. Since witches are feared and often ostracized or even killed when discovered, the mere threat of being accused of witchcraft can be sufficient to force people into modal behavior.

Glossary of Terms

Ancestral spirits: souls or ghosts of ancestors. A belief in ancestral spirits is consistent with the widespread belief that humans have at least two parts--a physical body and some kind of non-physical spirit. The spirit portion is generally believed to be freed from the body by death and continues to exist. Ancestral spirits are often seen as retaining an active interest and even membership in their family and society.

Animatism: a belief in a supernatural power not part of supernatural beings. For those who hold this belief, the power is usually impersonal, unseen, and potentially everywhere. It is neither good nor evil, but it can be powerful and dangerous if misused.

Animism: a belief that natural objects are animated by spirits. This belief can take diverse forms. Things in nature may all have within them different spirits--each rock, tree, and cloud may have its own unique spirit. In contrast, all things in nature may be thought of as having the same spirit. In both forms of animism, the spirits are thought of as having identifiable personalities and other characteristics such as gender.

Bewitching: using magical acts and/or the assistance of supernatural beings to cause something to occur. Bewitching is an integral part of witchcraft.

Contagious magic: magic that is based on the principle that things or persons once in contact can afterward influence each other. In other words, there is a permanent relationship between an individual and any part of his or her body. As a consequence, believers must take special precautions with their hair, fingernails, teeth, clothes, and feces. If anyone obtained these objects, magic could be performed on them which would cause the person they came from to be affected.

Cult: a devoted religious group, often living together in a community with a charismatic prophet leader. Cults are generally considered to be potentially dangerous, unorthodox, extremist groups by the dominant religious organizations in a society.

Divination: a magical procedure by which the cause of a particular event or the future is determined

God or goddess: a powerful supernatural being with an individual identity and recognizable attributes. Another term for a god is a deity. Like spirits, gods have individual identities and recognizable attributes (gods are male and goddess are female). However, gods and goddesses are more powerful than spirits and other lesser supernatural beings--they can effectively alter all of nature and human fortunes. As a result, they are commonly worshipped and requests are made of them to help in times of need.

Hallucinogen: a mind altering drug that can cause profound hallucinations or an altered state of awareness. Most hallucinogens used for religious purposes by shamans and others are derived from plants.

Horticulturalists: people who obtain most of their food by rudimentary farming. They usually practice slash and burn field clearing methods and do not add additional fertilizer or irrigate. They often have a partial reliance on foraging for wild foods. Their societies are usually larger and more sedentary than those of hunters and gatherers but still are at a low technological level and relatively small-scale.

Hunters and gatherers: people who live in more or less isolated, small-scale societies and obtain their food by foraging

wild plants and hunting wild animals. Hunters and gatherers are also referred to as *foragers*.

Large-scale society: generally a society with cities, industry, intensive agriculture, and a complex international economy. Such societies have socio-economic classes and a government with hierarchies of officials. The importance of kinship is diminished in comparison to small-scale societies. These societies typically have major organized religions and priesthoods.

Magic: using ritual formulas to compel or influence supernatural beings or powers to act in certain ways for good or evil purposes. By performing certain magical acts in a particular way, crops might be improved, game herds replenished, illness cured or avoided, animals and people made fertile. This is very different from television and stage "magic" that depends on slight-of-hand tricks and contrived illusions rather than supernatural power.

Messianic movement: A millenarian movement led by a prophet who is either perceived as a new messiah or who predicts the imminent arrival of one.

Millenarian movement: a conscious, organized movement that attempts to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of an indigenous culture or to gain control of the direction and rate of culture change being forced on them. These movements have also been referred to as *messianic*, *nativistic*, and *revitalization movements*. They were especially common among indigenous societies of European colonies. The Cargo Cults of New Guinea and the Ghost Dance Movements of the North American Plains Indians are examples. Millenarian movements typically have a prophet leader and religious beliefs requiring a major leap of faith by their followers.

Millennium: a golden age of great happiness, peace, and prosperity expected in the near future. This sort of belief is characteristic of millenarian movements. Literally, "millennium" refers to a period of 1000 years or the ending of such a period.

minor supernatural being : supernatural beings who are not spirits, gods, humans, or other natural beings. They usually have a human-like appearance and/or personality but can do things that are beyond the abilities of humans. Minor supernatural beings often have a "trickster" role--they fool people, do outlandish things, and disappear. In European folk tradition, leprechauns, elves, and pixies were minor supernatural beings.

Modal behavior : the statistically most common behavior patterns within a society. Those who do not exhibit these patterns are usually labeled as social deviants. What is defined as modal behavior varies from society to society.

Monotheism: a belief that there is only one god. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are usually considered to be monotheistic religions. However, the distinction between monotheism and polytheism can be a matter of focus. For instance, some scholars have argued that monotheisms, such as Catholicism, are actually *de facto* polytheisms for many of the faithful if Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints are prayed to for guidance and help as if they were minor gods themselves.

References

1. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion*.
2. Anthropology of Religion, Magic and Witchcraft, Rebecca Stein Frankle & Philip L Stein, 2005.