

## **MAGIC AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION**

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The categories we use in the study of religion come with their own particular histories and with all the awkwardness, confusion, blindness, and groping after understanding that histories encompass. The category “magic” for example, comes with both advantages and disadvantages as far as our task of exploring religion in its historical and cultural contexts is concerned<sup>2</sup>. Today I would like to muse over the use of the term “magic” in the study of religion in general and in the study of Melanesian religions in particular, and to suggest that “magic”, despite its tainted heritage, may be a useful category in comparative studies.

Bronislaw Malinowski gave the title *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* to his study, which appeared in 1935, of the symbolic words and works which the Trobriand Islanders of eastern New Guinea employ, along with various practical gardening techniques, to ensure good crops and a healthy community. Trobriand Islanders, like most Melanesians, are horticulturalists, gardeners. They spend much of their working time in their yam and taro gardens and, as Malinowski and others have observed, they sing to their gardens, they chant garden words or spells, and they perform actions, some of which are full of sexual symbolism, for, and also

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in, their gardens. In Anthropology and in Studies in Religion we have called these symbolic words and works “magic” — magic in contrast to religion, magic in contrast to science. Through his descriptions, which capture the poetic and aesthetic as well as the practical and political in Trobriands life, Malinowski has given us insight into how human beings organize and think about their relationships to each other and to their environment. Nevertheless, we might ask of Malinowski and ourselves whether employing the category “magic” clarifies or distorts the sense that Trobriand Islanders, or devotees of Krishna, or pagans in the ancient world, have of themselves and their world.

Malinowski, whom I count as an ancestor in the study of Melanesian religions, is dead, but Trobriands magic is still flourishing and so are Trobriands gardens. In order to give a sense of what it is that Malinowski called “garden magic”, I would like to share with you the words of two songs from the contemporary Trobriands garden musician, Sebwagau. Everyone in Melanesia knows garden words although not everyone sings them with the grace of a performer like Sebwagau. During the eight years which I spent in Papua New Guinea I, too, learnt garden words and “pig words”, and, although I was a latecomer not immersed from infancy in their situational logic and power, it seemed to me they were an appropriate accompaniment to the labor of horticulture and pig raising. Sebwagau is, however, not only one born to the realm of garden magic. He is a specialist, a *towosi*, literally a “singing man”. Each Trobriands village has such a musician. Sebwagau is famous for his repertoire, his skill in improvisation, and his voice. The first of the songs, a chant, goes like this:

Power, strength  
I put power  
Into the soil  
Nourishment, abundance  
The belly of our garden swells  
Swelling, swaying  
With excessive weight  
What tuber is this

Growing wildly  
Like fire.<sup>3</sup>

I have given you the words but not the power of the performance. Yet, even listening to the words, we might ask, “Why have our disciplines designated such words as magic rather than as poetry or prayer?” And, if we accept that magic is an appropriate designation, should we be looking at other data in our disciplines — the washing ritual of Christian initiation, the New Year observances of Judaism, the meditation techniques of Buddhism — within the purview of magic?

The second song which I bring to you from the Trobriand Islands is a request to the gardener's enemy, the caterpillar. It whimsically acknowledges the precariousness of a gardener's life. It goes like this:

Caterpillar  
Don't kill my growing taro  
We depend on it to live  
Our growing taro, brother caterpillar  
We need it to live.<sup>4</sup>

Incidentally, Sebwagau, probably influenced by Christian denunciations of magic, says the second chant is not magic, but just something he sings in his garden to express the gardener's lot. However, the first song, which is seen to play a role in empowering the soil and producing the crop, he takes to be of a more serious nature. Sebwagau does not deny that it is magic. It is important to note that the definition of magic, implicit rather than explicit as it may be, is in this case forged in the interaction

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<sup>3</sup> Les Maclaren, “Trobriands Music”, *Paradise* 32, 1981, p. 6. This article is from Air Niugini's in-flight magazine. Another well-researched and popular description of modern Trobriands magic is the film, “Trobriands Cricket”, which shows how the English game of cricket became incorporated into Trobriands life and immersed in Trobriands magic.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

of a missionary religion, Christianity, and a modern world view, with an indigenous tradition. There is, then, a tendency for “our Christian ritual” and “our scientific ways” to be situated in contrast to “their Melanesian magic”.

The term “magic” has a history in my own work as well as in the discipline of Studies in Religion. I’ll say something about both, before returning to the consideration of magic, especially garden magic, in Melanesia. In 1982 while working with The Melanesian Institute in Papua New Guinea I gave a paper at a conference on Sorcery, Healing and Magic which was held at LaTrobe University in Melbourne.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on the use of particular symbols in Melanesian rituals, I argued that magic should be regarded not as an inferior science but as a philosophy of life. At that time I was using the term “magic” to describe processes by which people in their desire for a more abundant life forge symbolic links between different areas of human experience. From then until now I have, however, pretty much avoided the use of the category “magic”. I have avoided it largely because of its derogatory connotations when used in situations of comparison.

During the years I spent in Melanesia I found that any time I used the term “magic” I had to do some explaining. First, I had to say that I was not disparaging indigenous traditions. Then I had to say that there was more to magic than an attempt to bend the forces of life to the magician’s will. Magic, I would contend, could be construed as an intention of involvement in life and of openness to the world. It was a seeking after power to be sure, but don’t we all want to empower life, and don’t we all both use and abuse power. Then, I would talk about magic and notions of causality. There are different ways, I would say, of describing the power of life and the interconnectedness of the various domains of life; no one has the definitive description. Some descriptions are more scientific, some are more poetic. Eventually, it seemed easier to

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<sup>5</sup> Mary N. MacDonald, *Symbols of Life: An Interpretation of Magic*, Melanesian Institute Occasional Paper No. 2 (Goroka: The Melanesian Institute, 1985).

dispense with the preamble and do without the term “magic”. And, so I came to rely on the category “ritual”.

In Melanesia part of my difficulty was that the English term “magic” tends to be applied by church leaders to ritual practices of indigenous religions, while terms such as “worship” and “liturgy” tend to be used for Christian ritual practices. Hence, “magic” comes to designate “rituals which are not Christian”, symbolic performances of which missionaries and local pastors disapprove. Their practitioners sense that disapproval and respond to it in a variety of ways. In this scenario Christianity is presumed to be the norm. However, while Christianity may be the norm for church leaders looking at magic in Melanesia, for others, such as development workers and medical personnel, science is the norm. And, on the terms of science, the discourse of magic is also found wanting.

I would mention that in many Melanesian languages both Christian and indigenous ritual practices are called “work”. That is, the actions performed by practitioners of various kinds — by healers and shamans, by cult leaders, by pastors and priests — are work, just as the actions of gardeners and hunters, of house builders and canoe makers are also work. Important enterprises require a variety of works. Gardening, for example, involves discussion, strategic planning, ritual performance, clearing of land, turning of soil, planting of crops. Hence, those words and actions we might call “magic” need to be seen in relation to other words and actions which we might call communication and labor. Even leaving out the magic — the poetry, the prayers, the symbolic actions and substances — Melanesians are very good gardeners. But, Melanesians do not omit their symbolic work any more than they omit the practical tasks of gardening. On the terms of garden magicians science is not enough, or, at least, science narrowly defined is not enough.

These past ten years or so it has suited my comparative purposes to study both indigenous and Christian religious practices in Melanesia under the rubric of ritual. Perhaps this has enabled

me to avoid some of the problems of the term “magic”. Nevertheless, I have felt a nostalgia for my abandoned category, an intuition, maybe, that it accommodates the surplus of affect and meaning which we encounter in the study of religion in a way that “ritual” does not, and I am thinking now of affect and meaning in traditions as diverse as Zen and Sufism and Kabbalah and Pentecostalism. I must admit, though, that it was not my own conviction, but involvement in a consultation concerning a possible *Encyclopedia of Magic*, that caused me to think again about the advantages and disadvantages of this category. The world views which underlie magic imply connections and possibilities - spirits and people and animals and plants and streams all affecting each other. They suggest a unified cosmos in which we can all participate, in which we can all have power. “Ritual” is, no doubt, a useful category. It denotes the ordering of acts or performances; it has the same root as “arithmetic”. “Magic” is a more problematic category. A magus in ancient Iran was a member of an hereditary priestly family who studied the stars and from them gained knowledge of the affairs of this world. It is, probably, because of its intuitive approaches to knowledge and its claims about causality that, in a post-Enlightenment world, magic fell on hard times.

Magic as practice and magic as philosophy have histories and ongoing lives in all the religious traditions of the world. Magic also has a history as a category in the modern study of religion. For those of us who study religion the question is whether construing some of our data as magic, rather than as simply ritual, or as symbolic action, or as something else, facilitates our knowing and understanding. For those who study other areas of the arts and sciences magic also poses questions. Mauss and Durkheim have stressed the social functions of magic. Wundt and Freud have reflected on its psychological role. Levi-Strauss has stressed that a study of magic enables us to see metaphor as basic to human thought. And Stanley Tambiah sees magic as a specialized use of analogy through which people create worlds of meaning. Let us go back, though, to Sir James Frazer (1854-1941) whose use and description of the term magic have had an ongoing effect in our

discipline. Frazer suggested that magic, science and religion represent an evolutionary continuum in human thought.

Magic, religion, science. In Frazer's scheme magic is inferior religion, and religion is inferior science. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Frazer, located in his study at Trinity College, Cambridge, studied religion in ancient writings by people like Herodotus, and in contemporary fieldwork reports of missionaries, traders, travellers and anthropologists. In the twelve volumes of *The Golden Bough* he traced the development of human consciousness through the three stages of magic, religion, and science. Frazer favored science as his paradigm for understanding human and cosmic life. However, he recognized that there were alternative, but to him inferior, paradigms.

Today we may have some doubts about the confidence that Frazer placed in science. Science does not explain everything in human experience. It does not account adequately for hope and desire, attributes of the human condition which are very obvious in magic, nor for joy and sorrow, or for human limitations and human expectations. Some scientists are open to forming alliances with those who study poetry, myth, religion and magic, forms which grasp and speak of the human condition in ways more or less satisfying to their various followings. What Frazer calls "magic" and what he calls "religion" and "science" are all ways of thinking and acting, ways of knowing, ways of negotiating relationships in the world. Yet "magic" and "religion" are, to his way of thinking, inferior ways.

Science, Frazer implies, is the way of thinking and acting for modern civilized human beings; magic is that of people in faraway places or earlier times; and religion is the resort of those who have not yet fully developed a scientific outlook. Magic, as Frazer uses the term, refers to an attitude of manipulation and a strategy of coercion. If one could find the right words and utter them in the right way, or if one could find the right actions and perform them in the right way, then the gods or spirits or powers of the universe would be obliged to do what one wanted. Malinowski and other

field work anthropologists, who have provided us with context for the operation of magic in contemporary societies, question Frazer's notion about the automatic working of magic. It is, they point out, an oversimplification and a distortion of the life and discourse which surrounds the practice of magic.

Religion, as Frazer uses the term, refers to an attitude of communion and a strategy of cooperation. A practitioner of religion, according to him, appeals to the gods or spirits or powers and commits himself or herself to a relationship with them, in hope that they may, graciously or grudgingly, provide assistance. Magic and religion, are, then, both seeking to make life-giving connections. Nevertheless both are, in Frazer's scheme, outmoded by science. The person living according to science would rely not on shamans or priests but on scientific practitioners of various kinds — medical doctors, physicists, chemists, biologists, psychologists — who make observations, propose and test hypotheses, and prescribe what people should do for their bodies, their families, their houses, their gardens, the rivers, the rainforest, and so on.

The problems with the Frazerian scheme are the same problems that beset us in our attempts to grasp that which is different, other, beyond our experience and beyond our imagining. We feel more secure if we have some norm. We tend, therefore, to approve one way of thinking, one style of language, one frame of discourse. Even in the academy we don't often work simultaneously with several models. We put fairly clear boundaries on our disciplines.

Malinowski, away in the Trobriand Islands, among practitioners of magic, could not agree with Frazer's evolutionary scheme, although he had a great respect for the elder scholar's work. It was, in fact, the reading of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* which led Malinowski into the study of Anthropology. His earlier work, on the basis of which he had gained his first doctorate, was in mathematics, physics and philosophy. Malinowski preferred to see magic, religion and science as parallel and overlapping paths,



each interpreting the world. His fieldwork in Melanesia, during the period of World War I, revealed that a people may be quite pragmatic and scientific in their approaches to gardening and canoe-making, and trade and courtship, and yet also practice magic.

Something that delights me about magic in Melanesia is its concreteness, its materiality, its involvement with everyday life. I like to rub white clay on pigs being cared for by my women friends and to say words which will encourage those pigs to become big and fat. It seems a responsible thing to do. It gives you a tangible way to express your hopes for the pigs and for the people to whom they belong. In Melanesia you carry out magic because you want wealth, you want health, you want to bear children, you want your pigs to be fertile, you want your gardens to grow. In some cases you resort to destructive magic to harm or get rid of an enemy. From the point of view of your local group that is good magic, although people with a more universalistic outlook call it black magic. (They may, nevertheless, kill enemies and call their action a just war.) I think we can all understand the motivations of the symbolic processes we call magic. Our problem is with understanding the relationship of cause and effect. Does magic work? If so, how does it work? Can I really promote a pig's growth, or a child's development, or a garden's fertility, with non-utilitarian actions and encouraging words? Anyway, who decides what is utilitarian and non-utilitarian? Let us remember that the words and actions of magic are part of a larger set of actions and words, some of which, like clearing land and planting seed, are quite utilitarian. Perhaps if we focus on the work of the magician from a poetic, rather than from a scientific, perspective, we may come to at least a partial understanding of how practitioners understand magic's operation within a communication network which constitutes their cosmos.

In Melanesia magic is performed to secure health and wealth, i.e., to establish a good life in which social and cosmic forces converge in fertile interaction. There is magic for gardening, hunting, attracting members of the opposite sex, bringing rain,

drawing wealth, and so on. The words and actions and substances employed point to desired outcomes. In addition to life-enhancing magic and its converse, life-destroying magic or sorcery, there are rituals which recognize, celebrate, and seek to control the relationship with ancestral ghosts and other spirits. The spirit cults of many societies explicate the relationship with ancestors, while periodic events, such as yam festivals in coastal areas and pig kill exchanges in the highlands, provide the opportunity to feast with the ancestors. What the participant describes as interaction with the ancestors, as talking to the fathers and mothers, and what the outside observer, in his or her objectivity, calls “putative interaction with the ancestors”, depends on magic, on forging links across the boundary of death. Other traditions make such connections. I think of feeding the hungry ghosts in Buddhism and placing flowers in the shrines of saints in Christianity.

Healing magic, which is carried out to remedy situations of personal and social incapacity, calls on ghosts to be satisfied with the gifts offered to them and to desist from their injurious behavior. Healing chants and healing substances also invoke aspects of the physical environment, such as the strength of swift-flowing streams or the refreshing coolness of water. In the first case the intention would seem to be to restore a damaged relationship, usually with a deceased kinsperson, which is held to be the cause of illness or misfortune. In the second case the intention would seem to be to supply a needed quality such as energy or coolness.

In Melanesia today, where some ninety percent of the population claims to be Christian, gardening and hunting, house building and canoe carving continue to be supported by magic. People perform rituals they have inherited from the ancestors, employ Christian rituals<sup>6</sup>, or use some combination of the two.

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<sup>6</sup> In Melanesia missionaries and local church leaders have intentionally created Christian gardening rituals which involve, for example, sprinkling the garden with holy water at the time of

The cooperation of men and women, of allies, and of affines in practical affairs are echoed in ritual. Women spend more time in the routine tasks of gardening than do men, but men assist in the establishment of gardens and tend certain crops (e.g., bananas, sugar cane, *karuka* nuts) which are deemed, by virtue of shape, posture, or texture, to be male. Just as women and men by their cooperation in the physical work of gardening replicate a reproductive paradigm, so in the symbolic or magical work, which is part of the gardening process, the acting out of female and male cooperation, whether by engaging in sexual relations in a new garden, or by performing actions which parallel sexual union, or by saying spells which invoke the conjunction of female and male, suggests and encourages a fruitful outcome. This idiom of fertility pervades Melanesian religion. We could probably make a case that it pervades all religion.

Let us return to the gardens of eastern New Guinea, to Dobu, a place not far from the Trobriand Islands. In a chapter entitled "The Garden" anthropologist Reo F. Fortune records the incantations used by a husband and wife as they mark out and plant a new garden.<sup>7</sup> Focusing on the incantations we can see that they reflect a world view in which human beings must cooperate with cosmic processes to ensure the fertility of crops.

On the day of planting as the Dobuan man places two small pegs, called boundary catchers, in the soil of a specially designated square of the garden he invokes a powerful being from above called Yabowaine:

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planting, erecting small crosses in the garden, and reciting prayers at the times of planting and harvest. At the same time lay Christian gardeners have themselves introduced Christian words into their garden verses.

<sup>7</sup> Reo F. Fortune, *Sorcerers of Dobu* (New York: Dutton, 1963), first edition in 1932.

Yabowaine  
come down from above  
come break up the earth.  
my boundary catchers  
break the earth in all directions.  
your breaking up the earth  
letting light into it,  
my breaking up the earth  
letting light into it.  
the yams *monolawa, gelaboi*  
my breaking up the earth  
letting light into it.<sup>8</sup>

The man also chants an invocation to Bulelala who, according to Dobuan mythology, was the first woman to plant yams. As the man gives special attention to preparing the soil in a part of the garden square designated “The Place of Pouring”, or alternatively “The Earth Belly” — the very names suggestive of sexual union — the woman proceeds to the side of the garden nearest the sea and then returns inland to what Fortune calls the “Place of the Magic Peg”, the peg being a stake which was planted on the seaward side of the “Place of Pouring”.

As the woman walks seaward she recites a chant for the removal of obstacles (Fortune uses the term “contamination”) to the gardening process. As she returns she recites another which suggests the growth of new crops. The pattern of a prayer for removal of obstacles being followed by a prayer for a benefit, is, says Fortune, typical of Dobu garden magic. Walking seawards the woman carries leaves of the *pies* cordyline with which she strikes rocks and sticks left standing after the work of clearing the land. When she reaches the beach she hurls the leaves towards the sea. She chants:

underneath the turtle  
turns on his side

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

they pack up their possessions  
they go far away  
insect eaten leaf,  
sear leaf  
rotted, worm eaten leaf.  
turns on his side  
they pack up their possessions  
they go far away.<sup>9</sup>

The “turtle” of the incantation is, in the Dobuan world, a supernatural being conceived of as a turtle. A literal interpretation would say that this turtle has the power to drive away garden pests and to remove other obstacles. A more existential approach might say that, like Sebwagau's plea to the caterpillar, the chant is a way of talking about the human situation. It is part of a communication system that unites people to each other and locates them in relation to the land, the plants, the sea, the fish — and those necessary, but annoying, worms and insects.

As the woman returns from the sea she takes a fresh bunch of *pies* leaves and strikes about as, on a more positive note, she proclaims:

my friends where is your food?  
much food is in my earth's belly.  
your turning about, your returning,  
my turning about, my returning  
new leaves sprouting on my taro  
new leaves sprouting on my *ponake* banana,  
I take them in my hand, I release them.<sup>10</sup>

The chants are part of a larger ritual which involves substances (leaves, woods, creepers) suggestive of fertility and growth, and actions (digging, pouring, planting) which have sexual counterparts. Gardening is, then, conceived of in terms of sexual

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

relations. It is the man who breaks up the ground; it is the woman who overcomes obstacles and brings forth new life.

Notions about gardening and about the relationships of male and female vary throughout Papua New Guinea. In many areas women have rituals for gardening, particularly for planting, which do not involve participation of men. The chants and the actions which constitute garden magic generally employ sexual images, homologies being constructed between the fertility of human beings and the fertility of gardens. A number of garden chants seek the assistance of female ancestors who previously tilled the land. In the Dobu ritual which we have just considered the man in fact chanted an invocation to Bulelala, the first woman, so Dobu myths tell us, to plant yams. "Garden words" and "garden works" may also connect the realm of gardening to the realm of exchange. For example, in the Erave area of the Southern Highlands a woman planting sweet potato cuttings, a bundle of which does not seem to amount to much, will chant a verse about bird feathers. Feathers are a prized item used in body decoration and are traded to northern neighbors. When confined in a bundle feathers give the appearance of being few but when spread out they reveal their abundance. The logic of the woman's chant seems, then, to make parallels between the realms of gardening and trade and even to connect them to each other. Each, in its own way, sustains life.

If fertility, and hence an abundant supply of food, is the issue in garden magic, it is also central to the male cults of various kinds in the patrilineal societies of the New Guinea highlands. In these cults the ancestors are honored and fed, and are asked to help the living. The ancestors' presence is mediated through stones, masks, flutes and other devices. For example, among the Kewa of the Southern Highlands a men's house community would, until recent times, have a set of clan stones referred to as "ghost stones" or "ghost eggs". The stones were buried in a cult house where, from time to time, the men would assemble to kill and cook pigs and marsupials for the ancestors. The focus of the participants was the reproduction of the social community as well as the fruitfulness of forests and gardens.

In the late winter of this year (1994) as the date on which I was to speak about magic to Theta Chi Beta, the Religion Honor Society of Syracuse University, approached, I sat one afternoon thinking about magic in general and magic in Melanesia in particular. It had been a long winter and I was wishing intently that I could do something, something concrete, to encourage and to hasten the coming of Spring. May Day and its rituals was still a few weeks away. Musing on things magical I went to look at a necklace made of a bark strand and six lumps of clay which I keep in my house. It was given to me in 1980 by Yoanes Ambalele, a healer and leader of a fertility cult, in the South Kewa area of the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. I knew him between 1973 and his death in 1981. The lumps of clay come from Kipiri, a place where two streams converge. Here, when the water is churned up, clay in the streams will join leaves and twigs together. "Joining" is an important notion in the healing prayers and techniques of the South Kewa. One plant, the vine of which is used to bind broken limbs and the leaves of which are used in healing potions, is called *runa*, i.e., "joiner".

People collect water from Kipiri and apply it to sores. They call it *kodo ipa*, "water for sores". The clay at Kipiri, people say, resembles the plaster used at the provincial hospital in Mendi to make casts for broken limbs. Ambalele did not say what I should do with the necklace. For me it is a tangible link to Papua New Guinea and recalls the hours spent with Ambalele and other healers. It causes me to think about the care that people show for each other by taking the slippery path to Kipiri to collect the healing water.

Well, I thought I would like to look at the necklace again so I went to take it out of the small net bag in which I keep it. It was at least two years since I had opened the bag. Imagine my surprise on opening it to find not only the strand of bark and the lumps of clay, the bark now cracked and broken, but also two strands of brown cord with pieces of brown cloth and images of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Simon Stock attached, what in Catholic devotions is called a scapular. I don't know who added the

scapular with the necklace of clay beads. Perhaps it was a Papua New Guinean friend who stayed with me for a time. Maybe it was another friend who makes use of the scapular in her devotions. I am assuming it was someone who meant well, who intended only good towards me and my house and, like Ambalele, wanted to give material expression to that intention. I assume that the person was a Christian, probably a Catholic.

Now, should we presume that these two forms of magic, these two expressions of human hopes and desires, were meant to work together? Or, should we imagine that the second was added to counter the influence of the first? Well, we don't know what was in the mind of the second magician, but we do know that in both cases it was important to do something concrete. Perhaps this dimension of concreteness, of materiality, is something to which we need to attend more closely in the study of religion. Maybe by employing the perspective of magic in looking at the various traditions we study we will see that magic is not superseded by religion and then by science, but rather that magic is a way of making connections, of conjuring up the world as we would have it, an approach to the world that exists alongside and inside both religion and science.

Magic — how are we to understand it? On the one hand, taking an instrumental scientific model as normative, magic has been construed as superstition or as practice based on false notions of causality. On the other hand, giving scope to the poetic, the aesthetic, the performative, magic may be seen as expressive of human engagement with the world, and as a means of participation in social and cosmic life. Is magic a useful category in religious studies today? Well, I am trying to work with it once more. Provided we are prepared to use magic as a lens for viewing and a logic for analyzing all, and not just some, of the traditions with which we work, it can facilitate our explorations of the ways in which we engage with the world through words and actions which are, at the same time, both concrete and symbolic.



The purview of magic may even help us discuss the nature of rationality and religion anew.

## SOMMAIRE

### *LA MAGIE ET L'ÉTUDE DE LA RELIGION*

Ceux d'entre nous qui étudient la religion sont en droit de se demander si le fait d'interpréter certaines de nos données comme relevant de la magie plutôt que d'un rituel, d'une action symbolique ou de quelque chose d'autre, en facilitent la connaissance ou la compréhension. Mon opinion est qu'en ce qui concerne notre tâche d'étudier la religion à l'intérieur de son contexte historique et culturel, la catégorie de «magie» possède à la fois des avantages et des inconvénients. Dans l'étude de la religion mélanésienne par exemple, son utilisation peut, d'un côté, servir à saisir un peu des rapports que les Mélanésiens reconnaissent dans les différents domaines de leur existence. D'un autre côté cependant, elle peut servir à présenter les traditions mélanésiennes comme étant moins raffinées ou moins rationnelles que les soi-disant religions mondiales. Cette catégorie a une histoire. Elle a été utilisée pour distinguer les pratiques religieuses et scientifiques des groupes dominants des pratiques de ceux sur qui ces groupes prétendaient détenir une quelconque autorité ou supériorité. Néanmoins, si nous pouvions appliquer cette catégorie de magie à l'étude de l'ensemble des cultures et des religions, alors cela pourrait servir à cerner un peu plus les façons dont diverses traditions cherchent à retenir ce qu'elles ressentent comme constituant une puissance.

Dans cet exposé qui porte sur la magie relative à la culture des jardins, je soutiens la nécessité de replacer la magie à l'intérieur de l'existence d'une communauté et d'un environnement particuliers, où elle sert à concrétiser et à faciliter certains rapports. L'anthropologue Bronislaw Malinowski a appliqué le terme de «magie» à des mots que profèrent les habitants des Îles Trobriand, ainsi qu'à des actions qu'ils accomplissent dans leurs jardins, afin de les rendre plus prospères. Il employait ce terme en opposition à ceux de «religion» et de «science». À travers les descriptions qu'il a laissées et qui saisissent aussi bien les aspects poétiques et

esthétiques que les aspects pratiques et politiques de la vie des Trobriandais, Malinowski nous a donné une partie du contexte dans lequel apparaît la pratique de la magie. Son œuvre sert à montrer que la magie constitue un discours, une manière de parler, de comprendre et de présenter le monde, une façon de participer à une puissance, et qui n'est pas séparée du reste de la vie.

Un problème que l'on retrouve dans toute société, l'université y compris, est qu'elle tend à approuver certains types de langage ainsi que certaines structures de discours tandis qu'elle tend à en discréditer d'autres. Par conséquent, la magie n'a pas été considérée de façon sérieuse comme une voie de connaissance dans les études modernes. Le temps est peut-être venu de réfléchir à la possibilité d'utiliser cette perspective magique comme une lunette pour regarder — et comme une logique pour analyser — les traditions sur lesquelles nous nous penchons.