

## Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 24

### Religion, Witchcraft, and Magic

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- **religion:** “belief and ritual concerned with supernatural beings, powers, and forces”
  - generally focuses on explaining the world and how one should live in it
  - with reference to the supernatural
    - **supernatural:** “the extraordinary realm beyond, but (believed to impinge on) the observable world”
      - nonempirical
      - must be accepted on faith
  - some of this belief is often expressed as myths
    - **myth:** a story...
      - often one that explains something about the world
      - that is usually understood to be not literally true in the physical world
        - but to have a more profound truth
      - often set in an ambiguous time and place
      - usually with supernatural characters
- Edward Tylor developed an evolutionary scheme for religions
  - the idea that religions evolved or progressed from earlier forms to more developed forms is no longer accepted,
  - but the categories that Tylor used are still useful
  - they are:
    - **animism:** belief in spiritual beings, particularly that many or all things have a spirit, life, consciousness, and/or soul
      - things are animate (alive/active/conscious)
      - Tylor imagined that this began with the notion of a soul or consciousness in humans, and was generalized to all things
      - Shinto (Japan)
      - traditional highland Peru
    - **polytheism:** belief in multiple gods
      - Classical Greek and Roman religions
      - Hinduism
      - Christianity, from some points of view
        - if Christ, saints, angels, etc. are considered deities
        - or if one considers the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be three deities, rather than one
    - **monotheism:** belief in a single, all-powerful god
      - Christianity (if Christ, saints, etc. are not considered deities)
      - Judaism
      - Islam (“There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is his messenger”)
    - Tylor and most anthro texts stop with these, but we should probably add
      - **non-theism:** religious belief that involves no god
        - Buddhism

- **atheism**: technically means belief in no god, but in general use means belief in no religion at all
- **agnostic**: a position of uncertainty or doubt about the existence of god(s), leaving the question open
- **mana**: an impersonal force that can reside in people, animals, plants, or objects
  - the term comes from Melanesia, but the concept is widespread
    - “power”, “energy”, “the force...”
  - mana could bring about luck or good fortune, but could also be dangerous
  - in Melanesia, you could work to gain mana
  - in Polynesia, you had to be born into it, along with high rank
- **fetish**: an object that contains supernatural power (such as mana)
  - which can bring good fortune, success, effectiveness, power, etc.
  - lucky rabbit’s foot
  - St. Christopher medal: Catholic patron saint of travelers
- **taboo**: a prohibition for supernatural reasons
  - contact between Polynesian chiefs and commoners was taboo, forbidden
  - in some French wine producing regions, it is taboo for women to participate in the crushing of the grapes
  - don’t walk under a ladder... any others?
- **ritual**: a kind of behavior that has many of the following features in *how* it is performed:  
Ritual is
  - formal, stylized
  - repetitive, stereotyped
  - performed at special times and places, outside normal life
  - liturgical: it involves words and actions established in the past (a “liturgy”)
  - in earnest: participants are not playing or acting
  - symbolic: it conveys meanings to and about the participants
  - social (usually): participants acknowledge *shared* belief in something that is known to, but beyond, the group
  - note that the concept of ritual is about the *form* of the behavior, not its content, purpose, or meaning
    - how or what is done
    - not why it is done
  - rituals can serve many different purposes
    - not only religious, but also may be **secular** (non-religious)
    - judicial: swearing in a witness
      - to ensure honesty
    - political: inaugurating a president
      - to create and socially recognize a transfer of power
    - entertainment: starting the Olympics
      - to establish the importance of the competition
    - social: rites of passage such as marriage or graduation, and many others

- **rite**: old-fashioned term for ritual
  - to create and socially recognize a change of identity
- magic: spells, chants, burning herbs, and many others
  - to achieve some specified end by supernatural means
- next time we will look more closely at how rituals can do all this
- **magic**: supernatural techniques to bring about specific ends
  - may be part of religion, but not necessarily
  - magic is meant to manipulate specific forces or beings to cause a particular outcome
    - magic is procedural, technical, practical
  - typically involves ritual as a method
    - ritual spells, incantations, or other ritual actions to achieve the desired results
  - example: prayer, a magical ritual that is part of some religions
    - it is magical: intended to achieve a desired end
      - cure illness
      - help with problems
      - gain serenity in the face of crisis or death, etc.
    - it is ritual
      - formal and stylized: specified posture, direction of gaze, position of hands, etc.
      - performed at a special place or time: in church, during a worship ceremony, etc.
      - liturgical: specified phrases
      - in earnest
      - symbolic: conveys meaning
      - social: if done publicly, during worship service, etc.
- Two kinds of magic (there are others, but these are common categories)
  - **imitative magic**: the technique resembles the desired result
    - voodoo dolls
    - house and field models on Cerro Baúl
  - **contagious magic**: the technique uses an object connected to the person or thing to be affected
    - such as clothing, hair, fingernail clippings, photographs
    - in some societies, people are careful to collect their cut hair and fingernail clippings and hide or destroy them so that no one can use them for contagious magic against the person
- **witchcraft**: Anthropological definition: actions of a person that supernaturally cause harm to someone else
  - this common anthropological use of the term is different from how it is used in some other contexts
    - Modern Wiccans use the term witchcraft for the practice of magic, both for good and ill
  - The Azande version (just one variant of many), famously documented by Sir E. E. (Edward Evan) Evans-Pritchard in 1937
    - witches
      - have a physical organ that has this power
        - it is inherited, like other physical traits

- the witch may not know he/she is a witch
- the witch may not know that he/she is harming someone
- witches may be identified using the poison oracle
  - a shaman gives a poison brew to a chicken
  - if it dies, that signifies one answer, if it survives, that signifies another
  - repeated twice for certainty
- the witch can only partially control his/her own witchcraft
- witchcraft does not defy natural forces, it just arranges natural events in harmful ways
- Witchcraft by witches explains the confluence of natural events that causes harm to a particular person
  - Why was anyone harmed, and why this particular person?
  - Witchcraft “brings a man into relation with events in such a way that he sustains injury”
  - Witchcraft is the “second spear”
  - But it does NOT cause events controlled by a person’s will
    - Lies, adultery, murder of a tribesman
- Example: people sitting under a storage silo that collapses
  - Azande know that these silos collapse, due to natural decay of the wooden posts
  - but why did it collapse just then, when those particular people were under it?
- Example: Why a skilled potter’s pots crack, when he is doing the same thing as he always does
- Example: Why a walker stubs his toe and it gets infected, even though he is always vigilant and wounds usually heal quickly
- witchcraft beliefs are still widespread, in Africa but also elsewhere
  - October 2010, Malawi: over 80 witches serving prison sentences (BBC October 13, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-11535155>)
  - 2006-2007, Saudi Arabia: two witches were sentenced to death in separate cases
  - into mid-1980s, Poland: People were killed for witchcraft by community members, even though it was illegal to do so
  - late 1960s, rural Oaxaca, Mexico: about 80 documented cases of witchcraft accusations
  - 1999, rural Bolivia: reports of witches burned or buried
  - 1998, East Java, Indonesia: about 100 witches were killed
  - 2003, Cambodia: Eight witches were killed
  - and many others... Schnobelen 2009, *Witchcraft allegations, refugee protection, and human rights: a review of the evidence*, Report to the UN Refugee Agency, [http://www.re liefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/RWST-7RAL7E/\\$file/unhcr-jan2009.pdf](http://www.re liefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/RWST-7RAL7E/$file/unhcr-jan2009.pdf)
- witchcraft accusations are typically made
  - in times of crisis, scarcity, drought, famine, etc.
  - against outsiders of whom people are suspicious
  - against community members of whom people are jealous or resentful
    - land or business owners who seem to benefit at others’ expense
      - who are not sharing enough, funding community needs, etc.
  - old people who must be supported, respected, obeyed although they no longer contribute much work

- people who are strange, different, distasteful, etc.
- witchcraft accusations are one culturally acceptable mechanism for enforcing cultural rules
  - about behavior, generosity, fairness, modesty, honor, etc.
  - those who don't abide by cultural norms stand out as potential witches
  - and are at risk of being accused and sanctioned, even killed
- Theories about why people do all this: possible functions of religion and magic
- Intellectual/cognitive function: Edward Tylor, Edward Evans-Pritchard, and others felt that religion served to explain the inexplicable
  - Kottak suggests that it must be doing more than that for us, since science now explains so much, but religion still thrives
  - I suggest that there is still a lot that science cannot explain, but religion can
    - love, death, what might happen after death
    - good and evil
    - why bad things happen to good people
    - the meaning and purpose of life
  - and even what science *can* explain is not really understood by many non-scientists
    - so for many, science does not replace religion, but rather is just an alternative type of religion
    - we believe that scientists can provide the truth, as others have believed that shamans, prophets, priests, etc. could provide the truth
- emotional/psychological function: Malinowski felt that religion and magic satisfy emotional or psychological needs
  - magic: gives a feeling of control over the unpredictable and uncontrollable, reducing anxiety
  - religion: provides comfort in the face of existential crises, including death, illness, injuries, birth, puberty, marriage
- social function: Emile Durkheim, Marx, and many others have suggested that religion has social functions
  - creates group identity and cohesion (social solidarity: Durkheim)
    - which helps the society handle crises and threats
  - promises of supernatural rewards and threats of supernatural sanctions encourage people to behave in ways that lead to success of the group
    - maintain peaceful, productive social relations
    - fulfill their roles in society
    - however, plenty of religions (about 25% in one study) do not involve supernatural rewards or sanctions for following or violating moral rules
      - so this function, at least, is not universal
- it can be hard to draw a line between belief based on faith and referring to the supernatural (religion), and belief that is thought to be empirical or not related to the supernatural
  - does mana relate to something thought to be supernatural, or is it thought to be part of the natural world?
  - would the Azande consider the existence of witches to be based on faith, or a fact of the physical world?

- how is an average American’s “scientific” belief in the big bang different from a “religious” belief in supernatural creation?
- how is belief in “microbes” that experts tell you exist different from belief in Azande witches that experts tell them exist?
- Next time we will consider where such beliefs come from
- Gmelch: Baseball magic
  - magic does not only occur in strange, foreign cultures; Americans do it, too
    - some kinds of alternative medicine that have no clinical support
    - fetishes for luck, phrases for luck, taboos for luck...
  - what baseball players do that is magic:
    - develop and follow a daily routine
    - rituals
      - Gmelch’s somewhat odd definition of ritual: “prescribed behaviors in which there is no empirical connection between the means and the desired end”
      - most anthropologists would use this as a definition of
        - *magic* in general
          - describes the purpose of the behavior: it is intended to achieve a specific end by supernatural means
          - not *ritual*
          - describes the nature of the behavior itself
        - When Gmelch actually uses the term ritual, he seems to be using the more standard definition of ritual that we looked at earlier today:
          - a kind of behavior with many of the following features in *how* it is performed: it is
            - formal, stylized
            - repetitive, stereotyped
            - performed at special times and places, outside normal life
            - liturgical
            - in earnest
            - symbolic
            - social (although many baseball rituals are private, not social)
          - baseball rituals develop out of unusual actions associated with good performances
            - if a player repeats the unusual action and has another success, the connection seems proved, and he keeps doing it
            - when he has a bad game or two, he stops doing the ritual because it isn’t working
          - example: rally cap
  - taboos (prohibitions)
    - usually develop out of unusually bad performances
    - don’t say “no-hitter”
  - fetishes: material objects that contain luck (mana)
    - may be associated with the start of a good streak
    - lucky glove, socks, jersey, a round stone, etc.
  - why do baseball players do all these things?
    - in general, it is comforting, helps concentration

- but also more specifically, players clearly think of it as effective at causing a desired result: that is, magic
- Gmelch argues that this magic is meant to control chance and uncertainty
  - Malinowski's theory about fishing magic among Trobriand Islanders
    - Magic serves to give a sense of control where ordinary means cannot do so
    - fishing in the inner lagoon was safe and reliably produced a catch
      - little magic used
    - fishing on the open sea was dangerous and the outcome was very variable
      - lots of magical ritual used
  - in baseball
    - pitching and hitting are strongly affected by luck
      - outcomes vary widely and seem beyond the player's control
      - even the best batters only hit once in three at-bats
      - just as Malinowski would predict, baseball players use a lot of magic for pitching and hitting
      - fielding is controlled more by the player's skill
        - again, as Malinowski would predict, baseball players use little magic for fielding
  - so the pattern in American baseball magic corresponds perfectly to the pattern in Trobriand fishing
    - tends to confirm Malinowski's theory that magic helps people handle things that are out of their control
  - Gmelch suggests that magic beliefs start randomly, from whatever is noticed when a good or bad outcome occurs
    - analogy to B.F. Skinner's pigeons
      - given food every 15 seconds, regardless of what they do
      - pigeons associate whatever they happened to be doing when the food appeared with getting the food
        - hopping left, bobbing head, etc.
      - so, 10 seconds after last pellet, they start doing whatever action they associate with getting food
        - the food appears again, confirming the association
        - and reinforcing the behavior
      - pigeons are quick to develop these associations, very slow to give up on them when they do not work
    - this actually makes sense as a simple behavioral rule
      - there is no need to understand why something works, only that it does
      - so pigeon brains are “set” to jump to these conclusions
      - and why not? it often works, and doesn't cost much or require a complex brain
    - Gmelch suggests that humans may have a similar tendency to associate actions with events that follow
      - and why not? it does not cost much, and it might help
      - we may have evolved a tendency to jump to conclusions
        - that something we did caused what followed

- thus to accept magic
- and to accept other ideas with little evidence if they seem to work once or twice
- and to remain convinced for a long time, even in the face of contradictory evidence
- does this remind you of any personal experiences, or cases you have observed?
- next time, we will look at exactly these issues about where beliefs come from and how they are maintained...